EAT DRINK DELTA

A HUNGRY TRAVELER'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE SOUL OF THE SOUTH

SUSAN PUCKETT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANGDON CLAY

VISIT…

EAT
DRINK
DELTA

frying oil
RICELAND
PORK SKINS

EAT DRINK DELTA

A Hungry Traveler's Journey through the Soul of the South

SUSAN PUCKETT ★ PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANGDON CLAY

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Langdon Clay's photo on page vi is of Steven's Bar-B-Q in Greenwood.

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I dedicate this book to
the memory of my father,
Jacob Charles Puckett,
who instilled in me a deep
appreciation for my Mississippi
roots and the tastes and tales
associated with them.

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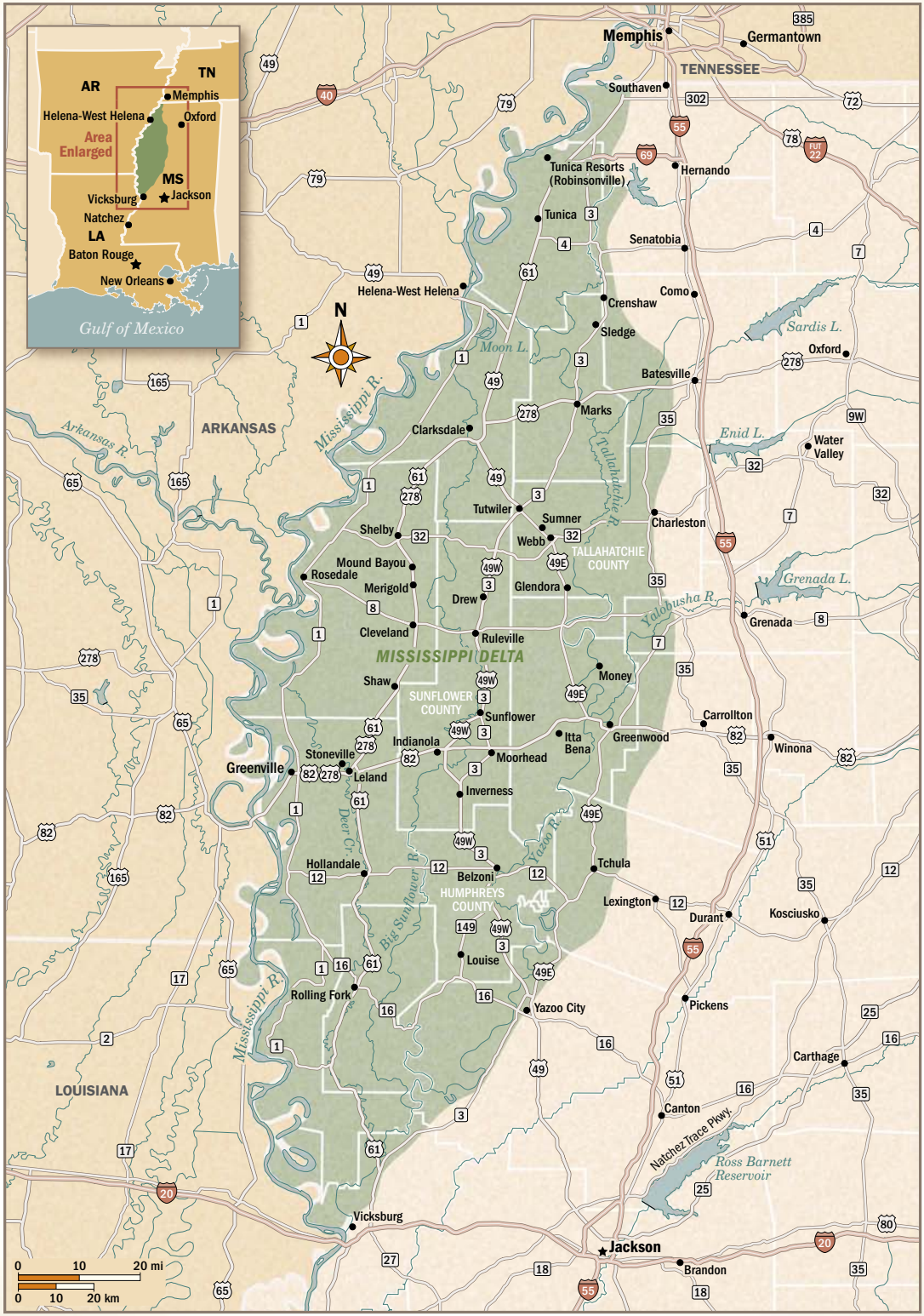
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EAT
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DELTA

INTRODUCTION

IT'S EASY TO BECOME MESMERIZED by the strange and haunting landscape of the Mississippi Delta—as much by what you don't see as by what you do. You know when you've arrived. The highways narrow, billboards and streetlights disappear, and the gently rolling hills dissolve into tracts of farmland as flat and wide as a calm, dark sea. Flocks of blackbirds swoop in ribbon-like formation across the expansive sky. Snowy-white egrets dot the edges of shimmering man-made catfish ponds and sinuous, swampy bayous. At times these are the only visible signs of life for miles.

THE DELTA HAS ALWAYS BEEN SORT OF MYSTERIOUS. IT'S DIFFERENT FROM JUST ABOUT ANY OTHER PLACE ON THE PLANET AND I REVEL IN IT.
MORGAN FREEMAN, ACTOR AND DELTA NATIVE

Rambling farmhouses with cheerful red barns and grazing livestock are eerily absent from this rural scene. The fields that once teemed with slaves and, later, sharecroppers are now worked by sophisticated combines and controlled by computer systems operated by a handful of technicians. But ghosts of bygone eras linger: A tumbledown shack hides beneath a tangle of vines and weeds like a forgotten tombstone. A cotton gin bears the faded letters of a plantation that is no more. A distant Indian mound forms a silhouette on the horizon like some humpbacked prehistoric creature.

Once a land of agrarian abundance, this fertile floodplain that occupies the northwest quadrant of Mississippi and touches the tip of Tennessee has been labeled many things: "the South's South," "Mississippi's Mississippi," "the Most Southern Place on Earth," and even "the Cradle of American Culture." It has stirred emotions and aroused curiosity throughout its turbulent history. It birthed King Cotton, the blues, and the civil rights movement. For much of the twentieth century, academics and journalists have studied its culture of "haves" and "have-nots." Most of what has been reported back to the larger world has been bleak: persistent poverty, racial tension, the steady decline of industry and agriculture.

Those banes persist. Yet in recent years, an odd thing has happened: The Mississippi Delta has become a tourist destination. Legalized gambling has spurred much of the new traffic, but many people come for other reasons: to eat, drink, and revel in a place that, despite its troubled past, remains proudly distinctive.

Fred Carl Jr., creator of the Viking oven range, deserves a big piece of the credit. He set up headquarters in his hometown of Greenwood and channeled much of his fortune into revitalizing its worn-out downtown with a

cooking school, a boutique hotel, and upscale restaurants focused on close-to-home ingredients. Actor Morgan Freeman, another native son who lives part-time in his ancestral home near the tiny community of Charleston, has also played more than a bit part in the Delta's transformation. More than a decade ago he opened Madidi restaurant and Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, bolstering the struggling city's reputation as a destination for roots-music aficionados who also like to eat well. Madidi closed in 2012, but other forward-minded eateries are thriving in its wake. Further south, in Indianola, the multimillion-dollar B. B. King Blues Museum and Delta Interpretative Center opened in 2008, leading more visitors to discover the smoked catfish pâté at the Crown and the deep-fried pork chops at the storied Club Ebony.

Travelers expecting to indulge in home-style fried chicken and fresh, pond-raised catfish are rarely disappointed. Fine examples of those Delta stalwarts—with their requisite accompaniments of slow-cooked greens and corn bread—turn up in every small town, and even in country cafés in the middle of nowhere. For dessert, you are never far from a lemon icebox or coconut cream pie piled high with meringue, or a towering wedge of classic caramel cake.

Meanwhile, young, self-taught and culinary school–trained chefs who left the region have begun returning to their hometowns to open restaurants that honor the flavors of their heritage. In abandoned mercantiles and refurbished gas stations, they serve meat-and-three lunches by day and braised quail and local freshwater prawns over Delta Grind grits by night.

Visitors are also discovering the culinary oddities of the region. From one end of the Delta to the other, old-time tamale makers wrap cornmeal cylinders filled with spicy beef or pork in corn husks or parchment to sell from roadside stands or café lunch counters. Pit masters mix barbecue into spaghetti. Convenience stores sell giant dill pickles marinated in Kool-Aid as snacks to go. The Delta is "kind of the outer edge of Southern culture in many ways," folklorist William Ferris once told the Associated Press. "That edginess allows things to happen there that would not be possible in other parts of the South."

The Delta is in so many ways a world unto itself. Its story has been told a thousand different ways—in books, music, art, plays, film, and yes, even recipes. Basically, it is a tale of two rivers—the Mississippi and the Yazoo—and the fertile floodplain between them. It is also the tale of two cultures: the rich, white planter class that controlled the crops, and the poor laborers—mostly black—who sustained that wealth. When native son David Cohn wrote more than half a century ago that the Mississippi Delta "begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in

Vicksburg," he was referring not just to two distinctive landmarks at the northern and southern points of the Delta but also to the two societies at either end of the economic spectrum.

Yet Deltans of all races and social castes share some common characteristics. People who live in the Delta—"one big small town" as they like to call it—tend to be gregarious by nature. They think nothing of driving forty or fifty miles to gather with friends at a restaurant or at a club for live music and dancing. Even in the toughest of times, they can find an excuse to celebrate.

Deltans are fiercely proud of their identity, which is largely shaped by this legendarily temperamental terrain. And nowhere is this better observed than in the places where they come together to drink and dine. For most of the Delta's history, these restaurants and clubs were segregated—first by law, then by habit. These habits are changing. Frat boys drink beer and shoot pool at Po Monkey's, among the last of the juke joints. Blacks have broken the color barrier at country clubs and civic clubs. Blues concerts, literary tours, holiday parades, and food festivals are sponsored and attended by blacks and whites alike. Towns that once made headlines for racially motivated crimes are opening museums and offering civil rights tours showcasing that history.

Touring the Delta is as much a head trip as a road trip—disturbing in some ways, inspiring and uplifting in others. To my way of thinking, the most enlightening and enjoyable way to get an honest view of the region and its people is by seeking out its indigenous cuisine.

A WORLD UNTO ITSELF

★ **"The Mississippi Delta" and "The Mississippi River Delta" are not the same.** When people in Mississippi refer to "the Delta," they are not talking about the actual Mississippi River Delta, where the 2,320-mile-long Big Muddy empties into the Gulf of Mexico south of New Orleans. Rather, they are referring to the raggedy-edged floodplain that lies between the Mississippi River and Loess Hills just beyond the Yazoo, an area of about 4 million acres in the northwest corner of Mississippi and at the edge of Tennessee. Flat as a sheet, and more oval in shape than deltoid, it's about 200 miles top to bottom and about 80 miles at its widest.

★ **The Mississippi River defines the Delta, both physically and metaphorically.** The river's sharp twists and turns form the curvy western border separating the Delta from Arkansas and Louisiana. The Illinois Central Railroad and

Highway 61 were built roughly along the waterway's route. River, railroad, and highway were the primary modes of transportation, widening trade and bringing in wealth and new influences from cities like New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago. It is no coincidence that gumbos, bread puddings, and other Cajun-Creole specialties are as prevalent on menus in the Delta as fried catfish and hush puppies and pecan pie. Or that the tangy-sweet red sauce slathered on most of the local barbecue is more akin to the sauces favored in Tennessee and Missouri than the vinegar- and mustard-based varieties of the Carolinas or the not-so-sweet chile-spiked versions of Texas.

Cotton planters brought back ingredients like shrimp and pompano from New Orleans. The steamboats, with their casinos, offered a lavish means of transporting gentlemen planters and their families to Memphis or the Crescent City for cosmopolitan holidays, where their palates became attuned to fine wines and sophisticated restaurant fare. Later, Italians, Lebanese, and Chinese would introduce spaghetti, kibbee, and egg drop soup into the Delta culinary lexicon.

★ **The hill country begins just east of the Yazoo River and before you reach I-55.** The culture shifts along that dividing line, too. Deltans are quick to point out that they aren't hill country folk, and vice versa. While the Delta gentry had a reputation for high living and hard drinking, hill country white folk were more likely Bible-toting teetotalers of modest means and tastes.

"Hill soil was not made for cotton farming," explained Bill Rose, a former editor at the *Miami Herald* from Bolivar County who now teaches a course at Ole Miss in which students report on poverty in the Delta. "It was sandy loam. Hill towns developed differently [from the Delta towns]. Towns were squares; people were more serious and stern. There were more small farmers who couldn't afford slaves. The business on the square was all about making a buck.

"Hill people feared everything; they ganged up politically as groups. They perceived Deltans as being wasteful with their money. They thought that high-toned Delta stuff was stupid. Delta people were slicker, and their politics were more organized. They thought hill people were uncouth, too serious, and not as much fun."

Nowadays, that rivalry between Deltans and hill folk has largely dissipated. Still, people from one side of that ridgeline or the other talk about "going into the hills" or "going into the Delta" as if it were an entirely different place, even if that border is less than a mile away.

★ **No superhighways run through the Delta.** They clip the edges, helping barricade the Delta from encroaching suburbanization and leaving much of its

regional character intact. I-55 and I-20 crisscross in the center of the state in Jackson, the capital. I-55 runs north and south through Memphis; I-20 runs east and west through Vicksburg. Smaller thoroughfares such as U.S. 49 and 82 have brought big-box retailers and fast food outlets to the larger towns. But many of the Delta's beloved mom-and-pop establishments hang on, with ardent community support.

The thoroughfare most associated with the Delta is U.S. Route 61—the iconic, 1,400-mile Blues Highway, which runs parallel to the Mississippi from New Orleans to Minnesota. Although parts of it have been widened in recent years, much of it is still just a two-lane ribbon of asphalt that paved the hopeful way north for thousands of black sharecroppers and laborers. Some, like B. B. King and Muddy Waters, launched their blues careers in the first big city on the way, Memphis. The subject of many a blues and folk lyric, 61 is also how most northern tourists find their way into the Delta. The Mississippi Blues Commission has erected markers all over the state to tell the stories of the bluesmen and women at sites where they lived and died. Not surprisingly, the largest concentration of these markers is in the Delta—beside railroad tracks, in cemeteries, in front of juke joints, and along these lonesome roads.

COTTON FIELDS TO CATFISH FARMS

Big agriculture has always been the lifeblood of the Mississippi Delta. Nature designed it that way. Millennia of flooding dumped layer upon layer of rich, pure sediment onto this valley—ingredients for some of the richest soil on earth.

Like the Choctaw Indians before them, the earliest white pioneers, who began arriving on flatboats in the 1820s, settled on high riverbanks around what is now Greenville. With them they brought slaves to clear and drain the land, and they sold timber for a quick profit. But the goal was always to plant cotton, whose worldwide demand had exploded with the Industrial Revolution.

Many of the planters' lavish homes were destroyed during the Civil War, but visions of prosperity remained. In the transition following Reconstruction, African Americans pinned their hopes for better lives and livelihoods on the Delta; there was also an influx of less affluent whites from surrounding areas and immigrants from Lebanon, Syria, China, Mexico, Russia, Italy, and other parts of Europe. Some of those immigrants, especially the Jews and Lebanese, became bankers and merchants; many Chinese and Italian settlers opened groceries.

Many of the newcomers and native laborers ended up working as tenants or sharecroppers on land owned by the longtime planters. By the end of the nineteenth century, the plantation system had essentially been restored, with few advantages trickling down to those who actually worked the land. Tension festered between former master and former slave and between Delta gentry and hill country poor.

The struggle reached a breaking point with the Great Flood of 1927, when a levee gave way and the Mississippi River flooded some 175,000 acres, killing hundreds of people and displacing a million more. Many of the refugees were blacks working to shore up the levee who were left stranded in unbearable conditions as rescue boats transported white victims to safety. A scandal over their treatment ensued, accelerating the Great Migration of much of the Delta's black population northward and helping lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement.

Meanwhile, mechanization continued shrinking the labor force, and from the 1960s through the 1990s, corporate agribusinesses absorbed most of the remaining small farms.

Cotton still has the highest dollar value of any of the Delta's crops, but more acreage is now occupied by soybeans. Corn is still a major crop, much of it reaped for ethanol production. Rice has been grown commercially since the late 1940s. The Delta also has pecan groves and sweet potato farms, although the bulk of other fruit, nut, and vegetable production is in other parts of the state.

But of all its agricultural products, the one most emblematic of the region today is farm-raised catfish—now the leading aquaculture industry in the United States. No longer the bottom-feeders that once dangled off many a cane pole, these catfish are raised in rectangular ponds under highly controlled conditions, resulting in a cleaner-tasting, healthier product.

By 1990 there were some 100,000 acres of catfish ponds in the Delta, more than anywhere else on earth. That number has taken a tumble in recent years, due to high feed and fuel costs and global economic issues. But Humphreys County still lays claim to being Catfish Capital of the World, and it's rare to find a Delta restaurant or café where it's not on the menu.

Meanwhile, Delta farmers continue to search for ways to diversify their fields and ponds. Around Leland, members of the Fratesi family were among the first to convert some of their catfish ponds to the production of freshwater prawns. Today, these mild and sweet-tasting crustaceans appear on menus in the Delta and beyond. Mound Bayou, one of the oldest African American–settled cities in the United States, is the site of state-of-the-art

experiments in sweet potato production. Several Delta pecan orchards sell their products in retail stores and by mail. In recent years, corn growers around Indianola have introduced Mirai corn, a triple-sweet variety produced in small batches for just a few weeks in midsummer and sold mostly in farmers markets and at roadside stands.

Despite the region's agricultural richness, organic farming is a challenge in the Delta; land sown with countless generations of pesticide-dependent crops like cotton is not easily converted. But interest in eco-friendly practices is growing.

In recent years, descendants of sharecroppers have begun planting community gardens on vacant lots with an eye to fighting the diabetes and obesity plaguing impoverished areas where access to fresh, nutritious food is difficult. Farmers markets are ever more common. Communities have embraced them enthusiastically, as have area chefs, who work locally grown produce into their menus.

The Delta likely will never produce the volume and variety of native produce found in agriculturally diverse areas like the Pacific Northwest or the Hudson River Valley. Rather, it's the revered cooking practices handed down from one generation to the next that keep the taste of the Delta alive and well.

THE MOST SOUTHERN FOOD ON EARTH

The plantation system fostered the melding of cooking styles that would come to characterize Delta cooking. Slave women and, later, hired help taught Delta matrons how to bake cornbread in a skillet and season field peas with pork fat; the white women in turn showed black women how to make fancy European-style cakes, yeast breads, and casseroles.

Full-service restaurants and buffet-style cafés continue to offer these classic dishes. The "meat-and-three" hot lunch is virtually mandatory on menus from service station cafés to modern bistros. Fried chicken, catfish, pork chops, and meatloaf are mainstays. Vegetables almost always include slow-cooked greens (turnip more often than collard), candied yams or sweet

potatoes, mashed potatoes and gravy, black-eyed peas or some kind of field pea, smothered cabbage, glazed carrots, and corn, on the cob or off. And okra—sometimes boiled or stewed with tomatoes, but almost always fried.

Biscuits, yeast rolls, and cornbread or muffins are the breads of choice. For dessert, you can usually count on several home-baked options from an old family recipe: peach cobbler, pound cake, caramel cake, pecan pie, lemon icebox pie, bread pudding, and all manner of custard pies. Deltans have a particular affinity for meringue-topped pies—the taller and more billowy the better.

While citizens here, regardless of age, tend to be receptive to trying new things, old favorites rarely become passé. Spring-mix salads and focaccia share menus with gelatin molds flanked by bridge-club finger sandwiches. Unapologetically frumpy and fattening casseroles coexist with grilled vegetables splashed with balsamic vinegar. Nostalgia reigns as the flavor that never fails.

WILDLIFE AND RED MEAT

You cannot order wild dove or white-tail deer on any restaurant menu in the Delta; it isn't legal. But with thousands of wooded acres for public and private hunting and fishing, Deltans are more apt than most to know how to aim a rifle or cast a fishing rod, and many a home freezer is filled with game. Outdoors enthusiasts from all over flock here during hunting season; besides deer and dove, they hunt duck, wild turkey, quail, rabbit, raccoon, and squirrel.

Beyond what they cook at home or hang on their walls, Delta hunters extol their wildlife in more civic-minded ways. Several communities host public events—like the Tunica Wild Game Cook-Off in February (pages 74–75) and the Delta Wings Festival in Drew (the Waterfowl Capital of Mississippi), which includes a duck gumbo cook-off (pages 200–201).

Every October in Rolling Fork, between Yazoo City and Vicksburg, the Great Delta Bear Affair (www.greatdeltabearaffair.org) commemorates the most famous hunting expedition in the region's history. In 1902, so the story goes, President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a wounded black bear near Rolling Fork, inspiring a political cartoonist to coin the term "Teddy Bear" and a toymaker to market a stuffed animal by that name. (The Holt Collier National Refuge south of Greenville is named for the African American bear hunter and guide who roped the bear for the president and who's buried in Greenville's Live Oak Cemetery.)

For the Bear Affair, renowned Mississippi game cook Billy Joe Cross has made venison pepper steaks and other delicacies using native wildlife. Black bear, however, is not on the menu. Although sightings in the lower Delta still occur, the black bear population in Mississippi today is believed to be less than one hundred, and conservation efforts are afoot to reverse that decline.

PURSUING THE DELTA MYSTIQUE

The Delta has always seemed a faraway place to me, even though I grew up in the state capital of Jackson less than an hour's drive from its southernmost tip. And not just because of the odd terrain. The culture has seemed just as foreign. I got my first taste of the Delta in the mid-1970s, when I was at the University of Mississippi—Ole Miss—in the hill town of Oxford. I dated a Greenwood native, and on weekends we would often drive to his parents' house about an hour and a half away. One summer weekend, we spent a scorching Saturday skiing on the caramel-colored waters that ran right beneath the Tallahatchie Bridge, the span that figured in the enigmatic 1967 Bobbie Gentry hit "Ode to Billie Joe."

Afterward, we cleaned up and went to dinner at a local institution called Lusco's—possibly the most surreal restaurant experience I'd ever known. It operated out of a dumpy old grocery store in a run-down part of town, but the people inside were well dressed. Some were sitting on sofas watching television, as if they were in someone's living room.

A tuxedoed gentleman led us down a hall to a curtained booth. We perused the menus at our private table, then pressed a buzzer on the wall to summon our waiter. Fat, hubcap-sized steaks were the specialty, but I ordered the whole broiled pompano, Lusco's other signature dish, because I'd never heard of it. The vegetable sides, the rolls, and even the salad were memorably fantastic. We all left stuffed and happy. But the booth, the curtain, the buzzer, and the pompano still mystified me.

Since then, I have spent the better part of my life writing about food, in a career that has taken me to top restaurants all over the country. Yet few of those experiences have made an impression as lasting as Lusco's. It was quirky and one-of-a-kind, but it also aroused my curiosity about something much broader—a region within a region I thought I knew.

My interest was further piqued upon learning about the revitalization efforts going on in Greenwood and Clarksdale and about the transformation

of Tunica from "America's Ethiopia" to "the Las Vegas of the South" thanks to casino dollars.

In 2009, I heard about a literary tour through the Delta that included visits to all these places and signed up—in part because I knew that the following weekend was the date for Belzoni's annual World Catfish Festival, which I'd long been curious about. I decided to go to both and flesh out my itinerary with some other food-related stops. At first, it appeared that my options were severely limited. But the more I talked to people, the more tips I collected. A publisher friend in New York encouraged me to write about my findings and turn them into a guidebook. A Delta-based photographer, Langdon Clay, agreed to accompany me and document our discoveries.

I was overwhelmed by what I found. Besides excellent barbecue, meat-and-three plate lunches, and catfish and hush puppy dinners, I discovered a trail of hot tamales, dill pickles marinated in Kool-Aid, smoked catfish pâté, high-end steak and seafood dinners in the middle of cotton fields, plantation-style breakfasts in antebellum mansions, and a café whose specialties included both Lebanese kibbee and thoroughly Southern mile-high meringue pies. The chefs were old-time country cooks, self-taught bakers, seasoned pit masters, and even a state senator.

I made more trips to the Delta. Using the two bluff-situated cities of Memphis and Vicksburg as my endpoints, I traveled up and down the Blues Highway and zigzagged the Delta between the Mississippi River and the towns along the Yazoo River and the ridgeline of bluffs to the east. Everywhere I went, I found good things to eat and drink. But in most cases, the cooks were what made the food especially memorable—people as colorful and distinctive as their Delta locale.

Delta restaurants are often as much museum pieces as eateries. Typically, they are housed in old buildings with mementos of their previous incarnation—grocery store, plantation commissary, speakeasy, gas station, pool hall, movie theater, historic mansion, shotgun house. Most have at least one piece of taxidermy on the wall. Some have been painstakingly restored with art and antiques, but in most cases the cracks and imperfections are left there, to keep the warm memories associated with the place intact. While the steaks and hand-rolled tamales are what's been drawing crowds

to Doe's Eat Place in Greenville for decades, the experience wouldn't be the same if you didn't have to walk across the warped and creaky floors of its steamy kitchen to get to your table.

My travels eventually brought me back to Lusco's, where several of my old college buddies converged for a reunion. The restaurant was much as I remembered it, although a young white woman rather than an elderly black man showed us to our table. The walls and shelves were crammed with more memorabilia and additional generations of family photos. But the pompano, with its creamy white flesh and luxurious tangy butter sauce, was as delicious as ever.

In many ways, the story of the Delta's unique food and dining culture is a story of survival. These boarded-up towns and hamlets may appear on the brink of death, but the region is very much alive. What lies beneath the surface is the undercurrent of hope and determination that has brought together whites and blacks to save a region that, for better or worse, is part of their very being. And the food traditions they have long cherished may very well be their path to salvation.

This, I believe, is the story of the Mississippi Delta waiting to be heard. Restaurants are just one place to taste the evidence of this thesis. Festivals, tours, and locally made food products can also enlighten your mind and your palate. Community cookbooks do their part, as do home-grown writers who have attained national recognition, like Martha Foose and Julia Reed, for stories of life in the Delta told through its foodways.

Back home in Decatur, Georgia, I have spent many hours in my kitchen reliving my Delta trips and sharing them with others by cooking the recipes that, to my way of thinking, are most representative of the Delta. Much of the inspiration came from local cookbooks and publications, such as *Delta Magazine*. Others came directly from chefs or home cooks. I love the fact that most of the recipes come with the name of the creator.

I hope my book provides—aside from great recipes emblematic of the region and tips on places to eat—a road map with plenty of rich context for understanding where you are, what you're eating, and who is cooking and serving the delectable dishes before you.

William Faulkner once said that "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi."

I would get a bit more specific: Go to the Mississippi Delta, the place the writer James C. Cobb called "the Most Southern Place on Earth." Enter with an empty stomach and an open mind and let the lessons begin southward—city by city, town by town, village by village, neighborhood by neighborhood. Bite by bite.

1 MEMPHIS

Gateway to the Delta

THE DOUBLE ARCHES of the Hernando de Soto Bridge swoop dramatically over the Mississippi River like a monogram on the Memphis skyline. Most people around here know this link between Tennessee and Arkansas simply as “the M bridge.”

Memphis has stood for many things: cotton, blues, Elvis and rock ’n’ roll, riverboats, civil rights, Peabody Hotel ducks, southern hospitality, and championship barbecue. But Memphis, most of all, is the gateway to the Mississippi Delta. Its location—perched on the last bluff along the Mississippi before it flows into the vast, fertile floodplain below it—has influenced every aspect of its heritage.

From the beginning, the port of Memphis formed a tight bond with its rural neighbors downriver. Delta planters produced lumber and cotton; Memphis businessmen marketed and sold it. The riverboats and railroads brought the wealthy planter class to the city for business and pleasure. They also brought immigrants from all over: first the Germans and Irish; later, Italians and Russian Jews. Memphis also had a substantial slave population that worked the plantations and helped lay the bricks and pave the roads for the growing city.

Memphis quickly became a gumbo of ethnicities and loyalties. During the Civil War, its allegiance was divided between businessmen unwilling to sacrifice their industrial ties in the North and plantation owners who feared losing their slave labor. The city briefly provided military supplies for the Confederacy but was under Union control for most of the war, serving at one point as General Ulysses S. Grant's headquarters. It survived the war relatively intact, but shortly thereafter several yellow fever epidemics wiped out most of the population, and the city lost its charter from 1879 to 1893. An improved sewer system assuring disease-free water eventually brought people back, and business once again boomed.

Like the rest of the Delta, Memphis's fortunes have always ebbed and flowed with agriculture. But a burgeoning resource proved itself immune to weather or market fluctuations: music. Blues men found a national stage on Beale Street for the raw and haunting sounds they'd cultivated in the Delta cotton fields they'd left behind, giving rise to gospel, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and R&B. Sun Studio and, later, Stax Records captured those sounds for the world, making Memphis the music mecca it is today.

In the 1960s, with growing racial unrest and white flight, Memphis's economy foundered. Beale Street fell into ruins, as did much of downtown. Even the renowned Peabody Hotel went bankrupt and eventually closed. In a bid to generate revenue, the city held its first official Memphis in May celebration in 1977. Unlike the Cotton Carnival, with its fancy balls restricted to Memphis high society, this "International Festival"—as organizers pitched it—was designed for the masses, featuring a month's worth of music, art, and cultural events. The following year, the Memphis in May committee added a barbecue competition to the festivities; the contest grew into the largest event of its kind in the world and cemented the city's reputation as the pork barbecue capital.

In 1982, Elvis Presley's Graceland Mansion opened its gates to the tour buses. Today, six hundred thousand visitors file annually through the shag-carpeted and retro-kitsch rooms of his private home; mill around the

poolside Meditation Garden, where he and his kin are buried; and eat at several cafés serving his favorite foods (peanut butter and banana sandwiches, among them). But the King's presence can be felt throughout the city—especially in restaurants. Every dining establishment that existed during his Memphis years seems to claim him as an erstwhile patron, and many have photos hanging on their walls to prove it.

The 1980s and 1990s brought other reasons for people to visit: the rebirth of Beale Street and the Peabody Hotel, the construction of AutoZone Park baseball stadium, and the opening of major museums related to the town's music heritage and southern history. Cinderella-like horse-drawn carriages and trolleys transport tourists to sites like the Gibson Guitar Factory, the Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum, the Center for Southern Folklore, the original Sun Studio (where dozens of rock and blues greats recorded in the 1950s), and the National Civil Rights Museum, housed in the frozen-in-time Lorraine Motel, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. The Stax Museum of American Soul Music (featuring Isaac Hayes's 1972 peacock-blue, gold-trimmed Superfly Cadillac El Dorado) draws scores to the Southside neighborhood known as Soulsville, where maps of the childhood homes of Aretha Franklin and other blues and R&B greats are provided by the museum.

Besides music, the other constant, through good times and bad, has been the city's vibrant dining scene. Restaurants that have survived half a century or more, such as the Rendezvous and the Arcade, are not unusual here. The Grisanti family has served Italian classics for more than a hundred years. And naturally, the robust flavors of Memphis are inspiring a new generation of chefs, who are putting their own spin on old favorites while celebrating products grown and made close to home.

The quirks of fortune could never kill this city's soul. You can hear it in the music. You can taste it in the food.

"THE LIVING ROOM OF MEMPHIS"

★ **The Peabody Memphis Grand Lobby Bar.** 149 Union Avenue. 901-529-4000. www.peabodymemphis.com

High above the bustling streets of downtown Memphis, the vintage red neon letters that spell out THE PEABODY glow like a beacon for miles around. On that roof looking out onto the Mississippi River, generations of

moneyed Memphians have danced under the stars to Big Band orchestras and disco bands—for charity fund-raisers, weddings, proms, or debutante balls.

But it's the Grand Lobby, thirteen floors below, that makes this four-star, AAA-diamond Italian Renaissance–style hotel an essential stop for travelers—whether they've booked a room or not.

Often dubbed "the living room of Memphis," this is where, according to author and lecturer David Cohn, the Mississippi Delta begins. "The Peabody is the Paris Ritz, the Cairo Shepheard's, the London Savoy of this section," Cohn wrote in his 1935 book about Delta culture, *God Shakes Creation*. "If you stand near its fountain in the middle of the lobby, where ducks waddle and turtles drowse, ultimately you will see everybody who is anybody in the Delta and many who are on the make."

Save for the drowsing turtles, that description is still apt. Only now, "anybody" extends beyond the local movers and shakers and visiting VIPs to include, well, pretty much anybody. At any hour of the day or night, the classy bar and plush sofas and chairs around that Romanesque travertine marble fountain may be occupied by T-shirt-clad tourists, power brokers in business suits, weary shoppers, and couples dressed for a night on the town. Celebrity sightings are not uncommon.

At no time is the ecumenical spirit of the hotel more in evidence than during the twice-daily ritual that has been identified with both the hotel and the city for more than seventy-five years: the March of the Ducks.

Every day at eleven a.m., a fellow known as the Duck Master in a gold-trimmed red jacket unrolls a red carpet from the elevator to the fountain. Spectators crowd in on either side. A player piano strikes up "King Cotton March," and five mallards waddle in formation from the elevator to their luxurious swimming pool. The scene explodes in a million camera flashes. Then, at five p.m., a crowd gathers again to watch the Duck Master lead the web-footed ambassadors out of the fountain and back to their fancy rooftop digs—a scale replica of the hotel, complete with its own miniature marble fountain and bronze duck statues, behind a plate glass window for all to see.

If the Peabody seems far removed from the rural Delta, the story of the hotel ducks shows how the land is the inevitable thread that runs through everything this region is about, even in its cities. The tradition started in

Peabody Hotel Blue Suede Shoes Martini

MAKES 1 COCKTAIL

2 ounces blueberry vodka
½ ounce Blue Curaçao
Splash of white cranberry juice
Splash of Sprite and/or club soda
Ice cubes
1 orange slice, for garnish (optional)

Pour the vodka, Curaçao, cranberry juice, and Sprite over ice in a cocktail shaker. Shake well and then strain into a martini glass. Garnish with the orange slice, if using.

The Presbyterian

MAKES 1 COCKTAIL

Ice cubes
2 ounces bourbon
Ginger ale
Club soda
1 lemon twist, for garnish (optional)

Fill a tall glass with ice. Pour in the bourbon. Fill the glass with equal parts ginger ale and club soda. Stir gently. Garnish with the lemon twist, if using.

the 1930s, after Frank Schutt, the hotel's general manager, returned from a hunting trip with some buddies. Full of whiskey, they thought it would be funny to turn the live duck decoys they'd taken with them loose in the hotel fountain. The next day a large crowd had gathered around the fountain, where the ducks were still swimming. The public relations opportunities were not lost on the hotel management. The ducks stayed.

A few years later, Edward Pembroke, a hotel bellman who had been a circus trainer, volunteered to care for the feathered residents. He taught them to march to John Philip Sousa's "King Cotton March," earning him the title of Duck Master. Over the next fifty years, he appeared with the ducks on *The Johnny Carson Show* and *Sesame Street*, and in *People* magazine. Several other Duck Masters have assumed those duties since he retired, and a parade of celebrity Honorary Duck Masters—Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, and Emeril Lagasse among them—have participated in the ceremony.

But the Peabody was ensconced in Memphis history long before the first duck promenade. In 1869, Colonel Robert Brinkley, a wealthy businessman and lawyer from Nashville, built the hotel and named it after his good friend George Peabody, an international financier and philanthropist who

died unexpectedly around the time of the hotel's opening. Located at the corner of Main and Monroe, the hotel was frequented by presidents, generals, plantation owners, and professional gamblers who came to eat gourmet food, drink rare wines, and sip afternoon tea in luxurious surroundings. In 1925 a new hotel, built in the grand style of its predecessor, opened in the present location on Union Avenue.

Nowadays, it's hard to imagine Memphis without the Peabody or its ducks. But several times during the urban blight of the 1960s and 1970s, the city came close to losing both the hostelry and its beloved mascots to bankruptcy. For a few years it became the property of Sheraton Hotels. Later there was talk of tearing it down. Then, in 1975, Belz Enterprises purchased it from the county in a foreclosure proceeding and resuscitated the Peabody with a six-year, $25 million restoration.

In 1977, the Peabody was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A memorabilia room surrounded with walls of glass cases filled with newspaper and magazine clippings about the hotel, old menus, and even the handwritten recipe for its longstanding signature vanilla muffins is open for browsing. The Peabody's ornate European-style restaurant, Chez Philippe, continues to earn top critical ratings for its prix fixe multicourse dinner menu and fancy high tea service. Also within the Peabody is the more casual Capriccio Grill, serving steaks, Italian fare, and a lavish Sunday brunch, and the Corner Bar, offering cocktails, live music, and bar nibbles in an intimate setting.

If you're just arriving to the city, I can think of no better way to get acquainted than to settle into one of those swank sofas, order a signature cocktail, and drink in this utterly iconic Memphis scene.

A MEMPHIS BARBECUE PRIMER

Memphians love barbecue. Pit masters of every race, class, and culture express their individuality through their seasonings, marinades, sauces, and cooking methods, but the style is particular. Unlike Texas barbecue, the meat of choice is pork rather than beef. And unlike the vinegar- and mustard-based versions in the Carolinas, the sauce tends to be thick and red, sweet and tart, with hints of spices known only to the creator.

Pork shoulder, slow-cooked in a pit for fourteen to sixteen hours, is used for sandwiches and pulled-pork plates. It's typically pulled off the bone by hand, and the big pieces are chopped with a knife. Then it's piled on

a hamburger bun with thick, red barbecue sauce and creamy slaw shot through with yellow mustard and pickle relish.

Ribs are "dry" or "wet." Dry ribs have been sprinkled heavily or rubbed with the house dry seasoning and allowed to marinate a few hours or overnight before grilling. They're sometimes mopped with vinegar before they're seasoned, and they are sopped a few more times during grilling. Wet ribs are coated in sauce after being rubbed with the spice blend.

Memphis barbecue pits typically include other pork products as well, like whole bologna and link sausages. Typically, the sausage is sliced and served on toothpicks as an appetizer, with Cheddar cheese cut in cubes or sticks, and the house barbecue seasoning sprinkled over all.

Besides slaw, side dishes include potato salad, onion rings, fries, and baked beans. Barbecue spaghetti, an oddity that turned up a few decades ago, is now on menus throughout the city—as a side dish or a full plate dinner.

Who serves the best barbecue in town? Ask ten Memphians and you'll get ten answers. **Corky's** is routinely cited as a favorite; the Memphis-based

chain credibly reproduces the taste of those time-honored methods all over the city. **Tops** and **A and R Barbecue** also have multiple locations and large followings.

The independent restaurants singled out here offer not only great 'cue but also insights into the Memphis barbecue story in a setting that reflects the personality of the individual proprietor.

★ **Charlie Vergos's Rendezvous.** 52 South Second Street. 901-523-2746. www.hogsfly.com

The narrow back alley behind the elegant Peabody Hotel that leads to the Rendezvous is not the most pleasant stroll in the city. It's dim and dingy, and you have to skirt several large, smelly Dumpsters to get to the entrance. You head down a dark stairway that leads to a raucous rathskeller, where you're assaulted with an unforgettably various aroma: sizzling meat, cumin, cayenne, oregano, hickory for sure, and possibly a hint of ammonia from a mopped-up spill.

The Rendezvous in other ways is happily predictable: The clatter of dishes and chatter of diners mixes with oldies rock on the jukebox; the walls are cluttered with murals and old Memphis street signs; the waiters, some of them twenty-year veterans of the place, whisk around in crisp white shirts and bow ties.

It was here that "dry rib" became synonymous with Memphis barbecue, and for many fans of this style, the Rendezvous's version remains the standard. The slabs are splashed with vinegar and enrobed in a ruddy, powdery mix of lip-tingling spices. Bottles of the tangy, tomato-based house sauce—along with hot sauce, mustard, and other condiments—are on the checkered tablecloths, but purists insist naked is best.

The Rendezvous ranks up there with Graceland and the Peabody ducks as one of the city's most popular tourist attractions. In 2010, *Nation's Restaurant News* named it one of fifty All-American Icons. U.S. presidents (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush) and A-list entertainers (Mick Jagger, native son Justin Timberlake) often visit while in Memphis. Mere mortals can expect to wait an hour or more to get in.

The Rendezvous legend began with a one-of-a-kind oven—actually, a coal chute Charlie Vergos discovered in 1948 while cleaning out the basement under his deli. Until then, his kitchen facilities had limited him to serving simple fare like ham and cheese sandwiches. But the coal chute gave him a vent, making it possible for him to add charcoal-grilled ribs to his menu. He devised a spice mix that drew from his Greek heritage as well as the flavors of traditional barbecue. Memphians went wild. The restaurant eventually added pulled pork, char-grilled chicken, brisket, and—more recently—lamb riblets and barbecue-topped nachos, along with the standard sides. The most popular appetizer is a platter of grilled sausage links and sticks of Cheddar cheese, all—even the cheese—sprinkled with the rib seasoning. To this day, ham sandwiches are on the menu.

★ **Central BBQ.** 2249 Central Avenue. Memphis. 901-272-9377. www.cbqmemphis.com

For one weekend in May each year, some 250 teams from around the United States and several foreign countries converge in Tom Lee Park to compete for thousands of dollars in prizes and five-foot-tall trophies. Sometimes referred to as "the Super Bowl of Swine," the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Contest is a raucous spectacle of hairy-legged men in tutus and plastic snouts vying for the title of Miss Piggy and of thousands of spectators in a mind-altering haze of smoke and spice gawking at barbecue rigs built like locomotives and rocket ships.

But don't let the frat house-style debauchery mislead you; the amateur and professional grillmeisters are as serious about tending to their porcine masterpieces as Olympians vying for gold.

For decades, Craig Blondis and Roger Sapp racked up countless trophies at Memphis in May as part of the Red Eyed Smokers and Hog-a-Holics 'cue teams before parlaying their skills into the first Central BBQ location in 2002. This A-frame building in the fashionable Cooper-Young neighborhood has become a favorite of barbecue fans throughout the city. Besides rubbing and slow-smoking bone-in pork shoulder and loin back ribs in the Memphis tradition, the pair offers vegetarians the option of barbecued portobello mushrooms, and they tout their commitment to eco-friendly practices like composting and recycling. You can order the ribs (or chicken wings) wet or dry, with a mild or hot tomato-based sauce. They also venture to offer other regional sauces—North Carolina vinegar and South Carolina mustard. Besides the usual potato salad and slaw, Central BBQ offers fresh cooked greens and green beans on the side. Pork rinds and potato chips are made in-house.

There's a second location on Summer Avenue.

★ **Cozy Corner.** 745 North Parkway. 901-527-9158. cozycornerbbq.com

Cozy Corner has been a family operation since 1977, when Raymond Robinson moved his impressive barbecue skills out of the backyard and into this unimpressive low-slung storefront. Ray passed away in 2001, but four generations of Robinsons have ensured his legacy lives on.

Desiree Robinson, his widow, greets visitors with a wide, warm smile and menu advice. "We're known for our ribs and Cornish hens. If you get the two-bone rib plate, you also get two sides."

Hickory smoke hovers over the packed parking lot. Inside, customers queue up at the counter fronting the pit barbecue to place orders for taking

out or eating in. Dining guide books and Bibles line the counter. The paneled dining room is small and worn, with speckled laminate tables and booths patched with duct tape.

Julia Child lavished praise on these single-portion-size Cornish hens during a visit in the 1980s. As far as anyone seems to know, Cozy Corner is the only joint that offers them. The Robinsons ate them at a restaurant in Colorado many years ago and devised their own version.

The food arrives on foam plates. The meaty, spicy ribs are saturated in sauce, and they come with white bread for sopping. The tangy beans have just the right aromatic smokiness. And the Cornish hen is as succulent as promised. The bologna sandwich, a comfort-food jewel, features an inch-thick slice of smoked bologna, sauce, and slaw on a bun. The hot sauce lives up to its name, cooled only slightly by the very sweet slaw and washed down by even sweeter tea.

The menu offers many other smoked treats, including sliced pork or beef sandwiches, wings, whole chickens, and turkeys. Besides the requisite beans and slaw, side dishes include corn on the cob and barbecue spaghetti.

★ **Interstate Bar-B-Q and Restaurant.** 2265 South Third Street. 901-775-2304. www.interstatebarbecue.com

In 1978, Jim Neely bought a rundown old grocery store in a rough, industrial section of town, having no idea he would be laying the groundwork for one of the city's best-known beacons of barbecue.

Once the neighborhood started to gentrify, he added a restaurant. A pit master he'd met while living in California had taught him the 'cue craft, and he built a closed pit that would allow him to cook his ribs and shoulders over indirect heat, using gas and hickory wood. He tinkered around with sauce ingredients for more than two years before settling on a combination he liked.

His barbecue became so popular that the Neelys eventually replaced the grocery store with more dining space. Now there's a seating capacity of 275, plus a drive-through window. It remains a family operation at heart; more than a dozen employees are Neely relations. Other relatives opened a barbecue restaurant called Neely's, which has no affiliation with Interstate, and have gone on to star in the Food Network's *Down Home with the Neelys*.

Grid numbers refer to
detailed map pages

Meanwhile, Jim Neely and his offspring maintain a loyal fan base at both the original and Southaven locations and occasionally turn up on the Travel Channel or in the pages of a national publication.

Their menu includes all manner of pork as well as beef ribs, smoked turkey and chicken, wings, and beef and pork hot dogs. That sauce—thick and red and spicy-sweet—is sloshed over nearly everything and makes an exceptionally fine barbecue spaghetti. They sell those noodles as a full dinner, including slaw, or as a side dish. You can get a Styrofoam plate to go, along with a cellophane-wrapped mini loaf of Sock-It-To-Me cake, a vanilla-frosted, cinnamon-laced, coffee cake–like treat that's been standard church picnic fare since the 1960s. (They also sell miniature pecan and sweet potato pies and apple and peach cobbler.)

★ **Leonard's Pit Barbecue.** 5465 Fox Plaza Drive. 901-360-1963. leonardsbarbecue.com

The curious architecture of the classic Memphis barbecue sandwich—hamburger bun, saucy pulled or chopped pork, tangy-sweet mustardy slaw—is said to have originated at Leonard's, a Memphis fixture since 1922. Legend has it that Leonard Heuberger's wife served the slaw on the sandwich, rather than on the side, one day when she was running low on barbecue. Customers loved it. Now it's served that way just about everywhere in town.

The five-stool stand where Heuberger began selling his barbecue sandwich for a nickel eventually evolved into one of the largest drive-ins in the country, complete with carhops. Elvis was a frequent patron and would bring friends for after-hours parties that lasted until the wee hours. The drive-in and carhops are long gone, but a mural capturing that colorful scene, along with historic photos from those days, decorates its present main location in South Memphis.

Dan Brown was fifteen when he got a job at Leonard's slicing onions. He graduated to sandwich maker and, in time, bought the restaurant with his wife, Janet. They continue to adhere to Heuberger's time-honored recipes.

Devotees like the Southside Scrappers keep coming back for more—as much for the memories as the 'cue. This group of about twenty Memphians started gathering at Leonard's former drive-in location when they attended Southside High School in the 1940s. "If we didn't have a car, they brought it out to the curb," said Eva Webb Donaldson, who wears her Southside Scrappers polo shirt. They still make it a date the first Monday of every month.

Leonard's Memphis-Style Slaw

Creamy, mustardy, and tangy-sweet, this version of Leonard's slaw (based on several facsimiles floating in cyberspace) provides a cool and crunchy contrast to spicy barbecue when both are sandwiched within the bun.

MAKES 10 TO 12 SERVINGS

¾ cup mayonnaise
½ cup yellow mustard
½ cup cider vinegar
¾ cup sugar
1½ teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon celery seed
3 pounds finely chopped cabbage
1 medium sweet red bell pepper, diced

In a large bowl, blend the mayonnaise, mustard, vinegar, sugar, salt, and celery seed. Stir in the cabbage and red bell pepper. Let stand at room temperature, stirring occasionally, for at least 30 minutes before serving. The vegetables will wilt considerably. The slaw can be made up to one day ahead; store covered and refrigerated. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

★ **Payne's Bar-B-Q.** 1762 Lamar Avenue. 901-272-1523.

The sign on the door of Payne's Bar-B-Q clearly states that it doesn't open for business until eleven a.m. But that doesn't stop customers from trickling in early if the door of this plain white cinderblock building happens to be unlatched. That fragrant smoke wafting from the chimney is just too hard to resist.

"I'm sorry, we're not open yet," Flora Payne calls out from her tiny kitchen, over the din of rhythmic thwacking sounds. She hovers over a large cutting board, alternately carving juicy slivers off a gorgeously charred pork shoulder with a razor-sharp knife and hacking racks of ribs into sections with a cleaver. A brick pit next to her holds various pork sections set above smoldering coals. A pot of sauce simmers on the small gas stove behind her.

Customers form a line on the other side of that counter and order from the plastic-lettered menu posted above. The choices are pork, pork, and

more pork, with only a few extras, like pork and beans and roasted peanuts in plain, stapled brown bags. She offers one dessert: fried pies, courtesy of a silver-haired woman from the neighborhood who delivers a metal tray of her cellophane-wrapped apple- and peach-filled pastries, still warm from the deep-fryer, just before the lunch traffic begins. There are no French fries here, or even iced tea; canned soda and water are the only beverage options. Flora lavishes all her attention on the pork.

Whether you order the ribs, the barbecued bologna, or the sliced or chopped pork platters, you can hardly go wrong. But it's her barbecue sandwiches that have elevated this humble joint in a seedy, industrial part of town to cult status. Flora assembles each one to order, heaping a mound of that moist pork meat mixed with crunchy, charred bits onto a bottom bun; swabbing it generously with a giant basting mop dipped in bright crimson sauce; then crowning it with a hefty scoop of mustardy, pickle-flecked slaw before adding the top bun.

They are Technicolor works of art and evidence of Flora's years of mastery. She and her husband, Horton, opened for business in this converted Exxon station in 1972. When Horton died of a heart attack in 1984, Flora

and her mother-in-law took over all the duties. Now she gets help from her son, Ronald, who may be the only person who knows the recipe besides Flora. "In all the years we've been here, only one lady guessed what was in it, and she hit it right on!" Flora said, laughing. Flora wouldn't think of ever tinkering with that formula, whatever it is. Or anything else about Payne's, if she can help it. But she does concede to one menu change.

"After thirty-seven years, we finally started selling jumbo sandwiches," she said.

But it may be wise to stick with the regular size—to make room for one of those fried pies. They are flaky bites of heaven, especially if you get one that's still warm. Maybe that's another reason customers are so eager to line up.

★ The Bar-B-Q Shop. 1782 Madison Avenue. 901-272-1277. www.dancingpigs.com

Sandwiched in a row of Midtown storefronts, the Bar-B-Q Shop is easy to overlook. But if you're a Memphian well versed in barbecue, you know this quaint little café. With its attentive service and cozy ambience—low lights, exposed-brick walls, tin ceiling—the Bar-B-Q Shop is a likable place from the start. But the food is what brings people back. The pulled pork is exceptionally lean and meaty and typically comes stuffed between grilled Texas toast (though you can ask for a regular bun, if you prefer). The ribs can be ordered wet or dry, seasoned and sauced with their award-winning house blends. And the Bar-B-Q Shop is especially well known for barbecue spaghetti, a recipe inherited from the previous owners, who might have been the first in the city to offer it.

In its previous incarnation, the Bar-B-Q Shop was Brady and Lil's, a joint dating back to the 1950s. Frank Vernon, a UPS driver, was a regular customer and once told the aging couple that if they ever decided to retire, he'd like to buy it. They took him up on his offer, and when they sold it to Frank and his wife, Hazel, in 1982, they passed on all their cooking secrets.

The Vernons changed the name when they moved from the Poplar Avenue location to the current space (it now seats about eighty). Son Eric joined the business, and the family expanded the menu of basic Memphis pork classics to include Bar-B-Q nachos, smoked turkey salad, onion rings, and brisket. For dessert, there's cheesecake, chocolate silk pie, and Key lime pie.

While Eric is a familiar face in the restaurant, he's also been instrumental in expanding and marketing their Dancing Pigs barbecue sauce and seasoning lines, which are available on the Internet as well as in

supermarkets. Like the other recipes, it, too, is the same one Brady and Lil used and serves as an ongoing homage to the couple that entrusted their legacy to a loyal fan.

★ **The Germantown Commissary.** 2290 Germantown Road South. Germantown. 901-754-5540.

In an affluent suburb of shiny office buildings, well-kept subdivisions, and high-end shopping complexes anchored by chain eateries, the Germantown Commissary stands as a reminder of an agrarian past. For ninety years, this rustic little building next to the railroad tracks in Old Germantown was a country store selling grocery staples and dry goods, mostly to the local farm workers.

Walker Taylor, a Greenwood, Mississippi, native barely out of college, bought it in 1981, installed a pit, and turned it into a barbecue restaurant whose popularity extends far and wide. The Commissary slow cooks pork over hickory, like most Memphis barbecue restaurants. The ribs are seasoned with the house dry rub and coated in a thick, dark sauce—sort of a cross between a wet and a dry rib. And the pulled pork sandwich—smoky meat piled high on a bun with a drenching of sauce and a dollop of slaw—is as impossibly messy as any of the Memphis classics.

Taylor's barbecue techniques, and the recipes for sides and old-fashioned desserts, are rooted in the backyard cookouts of his deep-Delta upbringing. The cool and creamy slaw comes topped with a deviled egg. And regulars know to save room for banana pudding or a hefty slice of lemon ice box pie or caramel cake—all homemade.

Tamales are an appetizer option, but unlike traditional Delta-style hot tamales, they're already unwrapped, plated, and covered in chili, grated cheese, and chopped onion—almost like enchiladas. The Commissary is also one of the few places in this region where you'll find Brunswick stew, the soupy pork and vegetable concoction that's popular in Georgia and Virginia.

An excellent time to visit is Monday nights. When many restaurants are closed, the Commissary offers All You Can Eat Ribs. Playboy.com noted this detail when it named the Commissary one of the top ten barbecue

Pink Panty Pull-Downs

This drink has been making the rounds at Memphis in May tents in recent years.

MAKES 1 COCKTAIL

1 part 7UP
1 part vodka or rum
1 part pink lemonade
Ice

Pour the 7UP, vodka, and pink lemonade over ice in a glass and stir.

restaurants in the United States. Taylor allowed a Playboy photographer to shoot at the restaurant and later told the *Commercial Appeal* that if any of his customers were upset, "I hope they pray for me and forgive me."

A TASTE OF BEALE STREET

The blues may have risen from the cotton fields of Mississippi, but the west end of Beale Street is where this music style took shape and found a national audience. Congress in 1977 designated this three-block stretch between the river and Fourth Street the official "Home of the Blues." It's now one of Tennessee's biggest tourist draws, with a French Quarter–like atmosphere that prevails day and night. Shops hawk airbrushed T-shirts and Elvis trinkets; music drifts continuously from the open windows and doors of neon-lit clubs. Bars sell cocktails in plastic buckets and giant takeout glasses shaped like guitars.

Entrepreneur Robertson Topp developed Beale Street (first called Beale Avenue) in 1841, naming it for a little-known war hero. Wealthy whites moved into columned mansions on the eastern end, while trade merchants set up shops closer to the river. Black traveling musicians heading north from the cotton fields began playing on Beale soon after the Civil War. Then a series of yellow fever epidemics wiped out much of the city's population. Around that time, Robert Church, the mixed-race son of a white steamboat captain, bought up a chunk of land around Beale Street, making him the South's first black millionaire once the economy rebounded. Banks, doctors' offices, shops, restaurants, and clubs—many black-owned—sprouted along Beale Street. In 1909, it became the headquarters for a black trumpet player and music teacher named William Christopher Handy. He was hired to write a song for E. H. Crump, a white mayoral candidate looking to woo the black vote, and the tune became the basis for "The Memphis Blues," the first commercially successful blues record.

Beale Street was famous for vice, too. In the 1920s, murder, gambling, and prostitution were rampant. Machine Gun Kelly was a frequent visitor. Voodoo was widely practiced at the time, alarming outsiders.

During the civil rights era, activists organized in Beale Street churches. Striking sanitation workers marched along the street toward City Hall to protest unfair treatment in the days before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lorraine Motel in 1968. Afterward, the area fell on hard times along with the rest of the city. Joni Mitchell lamented its demise in her 1976 ode to blues great Furry Lewis, "Furry Sings the Blues."

The area was virtually a ghost town when it received its "Home of the Blues" designation. In 1983, the Beale Street Historic District was formed with government and private funds to restore the area to its former glory. The Beale Street Museum, housed in a circa 1876 dry goods store still run by the Schwab family, and the W. C. Handy Museum, in the tiny shotgun house where the music legend once lived, are just a couple of highlights.

And from one street corner to the next, Beale Street flaunts its Delta-flavored dining options. Barbecue, fried chicken, fried dill pickles, hot tamales, and catfish rule. Much of it's better than what you might expect from spots that cater to tourists. Here are a few places I would gladly return to, for a tasty meal and a fun time.

★ **Blues City Café.** 138 Beale Street. 901-526-3637. bluescitycafe.com

Blues City Café is one of the oldest and best-loved restaurants on Beale Street. Like most of its competitors, it is designed to conjure an old juke joint: cement floors, corrugated-tin ceiling, juke box, music posters all around, tables surrounded by chipped wood benches and mismatched chairs. Adjoining the dining room is the Band Box, a stage where live bands play nightly.

The simple menu offers aged, hand-cut broiled steaks with skin-on fries and a roster of Delta favorites like catfish platters, gumbo, and hot tamales. But they are best known for ribs with a rich, maple-infused sauce. The hot tamales are spicy, oily, and wrapped in parchment rather than cornhusks—reminiscent of those served at Doe's Eat Place (pages 154–57), the famed steak house in Greenville, Mississippi, deep in the Delta.

That's not just a coincidence. When this restaurant opened in 1991, it was a Doe's franchise, and Bonnie Mack, who'd been the chef at the Doe's in Little Rock, was hired to run its kitchen. A few years later, investors bought it, expanded the menu, and changed the name to Blues City Café. Mack stayed, winning over locals and tourists with both his menu and outgoing personality. Bill Clinton was known to stop in on visits to Memphis, having been a regular at the Little Rock Doe's when Mack worked there.

Mack passed away in August 2006 at the age of sixty-six. A few days later, a funeral procession was held in his honor beginning at Fourth and Beale and ending at Blues City Café.

★ **Dyer's Burgers.** 205 Beale Street. 901-527-3937.www.dyersonbeale.com

The young and remarkably trim employees of Dyer's Burgers wear T-shirts with a thought-provoking question on the back: "Have you had your vitamin 'G' today?"

The "G" stands for grease. And there's no shortage of it here in this spotless, retro-looking diner across from W. C. Handy Park. The proof is bubbling in the huge, beat-up skillet atop the gas stove where a cook fills orders. Viewing the process from one of the swivel stools on the other side of the stainless steel counter, you can practically feel your arteries hardening.

First, the cook dips a long metal spatula into the hot grease, spreads it on the marble counter, and plops a scoop of ground beef on top. Then he dips the spatula in grease again, flattens the patty with a few sharp whacks, and lifts the beef into the sizzling skillet. As the outside of the burger turns crispy and brown, he sets a slice of cheese on the spatula and slides it into the grease for a quick second to melt slightly. With amazing dexterity, he flips it atop the burger and then stuffs both inside a Wonder Bread bun filled with grilled onions, dill pickle slices, and yellow mustard.

Finally, he smears another coat of grease onto the counter, sets the entire burger atop, and squishes it together with his rubber-gloved hands. With a big grin, he delivers this cholesterol bomb in a napkin-lined basket. It may be the most delicious hamburger you'll ever eat.

This is not just any old grease, the management claims. Supposedly, it contains molecules from the first batch of burgers Elmer "Doc" Dyer served to customers in 1912. According to legend, the grease has been filtered daily ever since, even though the management and locations have changed over the years. So prized is this grease that armed police escorts were called on to supervise its transfer from one building to another.

Dyer's isn't just about the burger. For dessert, you can get a Twinkie—deep-fried, of course.

★ **Itta Bena.** 145 Second Avenue. 901-578-3031. www.ittabenamemphis.com

Every restaurant on Beale Street has a gimmick. Itta Bena's is that it's completely hidden from view. To get to there, you take a discreet stairway inside B. B. King's Blues Club, its sister restaurant, to the third floor. Or you

can climb the fire escape at the rear of the building on Second Street, where a valet is waiting. Once inside, it's as if you've been transported from the raucous tourist scene below to a Prohibition-era speakeasy.

Tall, cobalt-tinted windows create a twilit ambience across the room, even before the sun disappears. Dark wood and burgundy leather abound. White tablecloths drape the tables. There's a large, handsome bar, and only the occasional bass thump rising up from below reminds you you're on Beale Street.

Itta Bena is named for the tiny farm town deep in the Delta where B. B. King was born. A silhouette of its water tower is in the logo. But the food on this menu never appeared on any sharecropper's table. Mascarpone-enriched grits are topped with seared scallops; duck confit pairs with wild-rice waffles and blueberry hoisin sauce. If you're more interested in the ambience than the food, have the signature cocktail at the bar—a sweet tea mojito—maybe with a cup of the ultrarich, sherry-spiked she-crab soup.

MORE MEMPHIS CLASSICS

★ **Alcenia's.** 317 North Main Street. 901-523-0200. alcenias.com

"How you doing, baby? Give me a hug!"

B. J. Chester-Tamayo threw her arms around a clean-cut young man who had just approached the counter to greet her.

Her broad smile faded slightly when she stepped back and noticed a pink smudge on his collar. "Uh-oh. I got lipstick on your shirt." They both erupted in laughter.

Chester-Tamayo's effusive welcome is as emblematic of the dining experience at her upbeat little café in downtown Memphis's historic Pinch District as the basket of hot-water cornbread and homemade preserves that complement her inspired interpretations of soul food classics.

Chester-Tamayo describes her restaurant as "ghetto-chic." That means lamps covered with polka-dotted shades, hand-painted ladder-back chairs with zebra-striped seats, tables covered in orange and purple vinyl, and Mardi Gras masks and beads artfully strewn all around. The most prominent feature in this cheerful space is an oversized painting of a gray-haired woman with big glasses and a beaming smile tenderly holding a wide-eyed child wearing a blue bonnet.

That's Chester-Tamayo's mother and grandchild. Both are named Alcenia—the inspiration and lifeblood of the restaurant. They gave her the

strength to begin selling sweets and preserves at this storefront in 1997 after Chester-Tamayo lost her only son in a motorcycle accident. "I started cooking and praying," she said. "It was part of my healing process." She consulted her mother in Meridian, Mississippi, about dishes she remembered growing up, like the homemade peach preserves that tasted so good with warm biscuits.

For someone attempting to build a new life in the face of hardship, her choice of location was a fitting one. "Pinch-Gut" was the city's first business district, earning its odd name in the early nineteenth century, when it attracted a large number of poor Irish immigrants so emaciated their waists were cinched tight by their belts. Jews, Italians, Russians, and Greeks settled there, too, and eventually the district flourished. That lasted until after World War II, when residents began moving out to the suburbs.

Then, in the 1980s, urban renewal brought the downtown trolley lines, the twenty thousand–plus–seat Pyramid Arena, modern condominiums and townhouses, and a new boost of entrepreneurial spirit. Chester-Tamayo and her dream of nurturing her city with her mother's food legacy blended right in.

Although she started out selling only desserts and homemade preserves, her shop soon became a full-fledged eatery, prized for its fresh, made-to-order plate lunches. Each dish bears her signature. There's a touch of her

homemade apple butter in the waffles, a shot of jerk seasoning in her meltingly tender cabbage, and a small tub of cinnamon-butter with her sweet potato fries. Her crispy, battered cucumber slices stand in for the more prevalent fried dill pickles.

Other favorites are fried or baked catfish, pork chops, chicken and waffles, and salmon croquettes, all served with a side of moist, pancake-like hot-water cornbread. If you like, ask for a dollop of her famous "cha-cha"—a spicy, vinegary relish of cabbage, tomato, and peppers. Sweet potato and buttermilk pies, and her bread pudding, are worth saving room for.

Alcenia's Sweet Potato Pie

Sweet potato pie is a requisite dessert on nearly every soul food restaurant in the Delta. B. J. Tamayo shared the secrets for hers in her self-published autobiographical cookbook, *Alcenia's Healing the Soul*, available at the restaurant or through her website. The genius behind its intense sweet potato flavor is boiling the potatoes in their skins before peeling.

MAKES TWO 9-INCH PIES, 16 SERVINGS

3 pounds small sweet potatoes (6 to 8 ounces each)
¼ pound (1 stick) butter, at room temperature
1¼ to 1¾ cups sugar (natural sweetness of fresh sweet potatoes varies, so use more or less to taste)
3 large eggs, lightly beaten
¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
¾ cup evaporated milk
2 unbaked 9-inch pie shells

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Scrub the potatoes and place them in a large pot. Cover with cold water to a depth of 2 inches. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer until the potatoes can be easily pierced through with a paring knife, about 40 minutes. Drain well. When cool enough to handle, peel the potatoes and place the pulp in a large bowl. Mash as smooth as possible with a hand-held potato masher.

Stir in the butter and then stir in the sugar, eggs, nutmeg, and vanilla. Add the milk and stir until smooth.

Divide the sweet potato mixture between the pie shells. Bake until the filling is set and a tester inserted into the center comes out clean, 25 to 30 minutes.

Cool on a wire rack before serving at room temperature.

★ **Bob's Barksdale Restaurant.** 237 South Cooper Street. 901-722-2193.

On the edge of the trendy Cooper-Young neighborhood is a positively untrendy white storefront that stands in stark contrast to the adjoining lime-green building occupied by the Glamrus Runway Exquisite Hair and Nail Salon. Bob's Barksdale Restaurant has been a fixture on this street corner for more than thirty years. Inside, the brown carpeting is worn, the fluorescent lights are harsh, and the air-conditioning units hum noisily, but the regulars—old-timers, hipsters, office workers, and labor workers—don't mind at all. An oversized American flag stretches over one wall. In every part of the restaurant are aged photos of boxers and basketball players, beauty queens and local celebrities. During political campaigns, candidates at the local and national level drop in for photo ops. If he's not behind the cash register, Bob Henry is generally patrolling the dark-paneled dining room, chatting up patrons.

The coffee is strong and comes in thick white mugs. You can order sausage gravy with the scratch biscuits, saucer-size slabs of country ham with red-eye gravy to spoon over your grits, and eggs cooked as you please. At

lunch, there are burgers and club sandwiches and catfish dinners, as well as plate lunch specials with freshly made cornbread and rolls. Tommie, one of the longtime employees, bakes homemade pies—vanilla or chocolate chess, coconut meringue, pecan, and apple.

★ **Calvary Waffle Shop.** 102 North Second Street. 901-525-6602. (Open during Lent only) calvarymemphis.org/waffles

The Calvary Waffle Shop is not a restaurant. Rather, it's a rite of spring as predictable in Memphis as the first daffodil. Every Lenten season for more than eighty years, Calvary Episcopal Church has hosted daily community feasts in the church basement, featuring a luncheon menu that's changed little since the beginning.

An exuberant team of volunteers seats as many as a thousand customers a day at the long folding tables that fill the fellowship hall. At each place is a paper menu listing the daily specials and a pencil for you to mark your order. The star attraction, of course, is the waffles, which a group of ladies cooks on waffle irons lined up on a table near the entrance. You can get them with sausage and syrup or topped with creamy chicken hash. Or you can opt for the Calvary Salad Plate: a scoop of chicken salad, a pear half smeared with cottage cheese, and a jiggly square of tomato aspic.

Then there are the daily specials, like shrimp mousse, seafood gumbo, corned beef and cabbage with corn sticks, and—most highly anticipated of all—fish pudding, served on Wednesdays and Fridays. This rich, sherry-spiked casserole has been a Waffle Shop standby since the beginning. And despite its stodgy-sounding name, it's always the first to disappear.

Boston cream pie is the signature dessert, and they have their own style of making it. Squares of vanilla cake specially ordered from St. Louis are drenched in homemade custard sauce, whipped cream, and nuts (no chocolate in their version). Lemon chess pie, Schaum torte, and bourbon cake are rotating options throughout the week.

The Calvary Women's Guild started the Waffle Shop in 1928 to raise money for missionary work and other church programs. Lacking space in the church, they worked out of a storefront along an alley known as Whiskey Chute, which was then a bar and brothel district. They brought waffle irons and pots and pans from home and cooked atop a coal stove. There was no running water, so the water they used for drinking, cleaning, and cooking had to be transported in buckets from a nearby fire hydrant.

Nowadays, nearly all the food is prepared in the church's modern, commercial kitchen. The wait staff includes volunteers from Calvary as well as other churches, and proceeds benefit ministries from all of those participating churches.

Calvary Waffle Shop Lenten Fish Pudding

This sherry-spiked, soufflé-like casserole is comforting and delicious—one of the most anticipated items at the Waffle Shop.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

1⅔ pounds cooked and deboned mild-flavored fish (such as pollack, red snapper, cod, or catfish)
1⅓ cups milk
2½ tablespoons butter, melted
¼ cup chopped parsley
2 tablespoons grated onion
½ cup cracker crumbs, divided
2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons lemon juice
1 tablespoon dry sherry
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon baking soda
Dash of Tabasco sauce
4 large eggs, well beaten
2 tablespoons (¼ stick) butter, cut into small cubes

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Butter a 2-quart casserole dish.

In a large bowl, flake the fish with a fork, picking through to remove any bones. Stir in the milk, melted butter, parsley, onion, 3 tablespoons of the cracker crumbs, the lemon juice, sherry, salt, baking soda, and Tabasco sauce. Stir in the eggs.

Pour into the prepared dish. Sprinkle with the remaining 5 tablespoons of the cracker crumbs. Dot with the cubed butter. Bake for 10 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F and continue baking until the pudding is set, 20 to 30 minutes more.

★ **Center for Southern Folklore Store and Café.** 123 South Main Street. At Peabody Place Trolley Stop. 901-525-3655. www.southernfolklore.com

Here in this bright, art-filled shop amid luxury downtown hotels and high-end retail stores, you can purchase a pig sculpture made of bottle caps, a short video of a Delta river baptism, or a copy of *A History of Garage and Frat Bands in Memphis* with liner notes. You can also take a seat at one of the wildly painted tables and have a pastry with iced tea or a specialty coffee drink. Stop in around lunchtime on a Thursday or Friday and you get a double bonus: a plate lunch of delicious, authentic soul food and a free concert by southern musicians of all genres. Here you can also buy a ticket to a concert that takes place every Saturday night on the larger stage within the center's facility, where primitive quilts and other local artwork cover the walls.

Ella Kizzie, a longtime Memphis caterer, prepares the traditional southern spreads for special nighttime events, as well as the lunches served in the café. A typical lunch plate includes baked lemon-herbed chicken, crusty macaroni and cheese, meat-free collard greens, black-eyed peas, and hot-water cornbread, with warm peach cobbler à la mode for dessert. She has demonstrated how to make some of those dishes during the Memphis Music and Heritage Festival, which the center hosts each Labor Day.

★ **Coletta's.** 1063 South Parkway East. 901-948-7652.

Long before every pizza parlor in America was putting pepperoni on its pies, Coletta's was putting barbecue on theirs. This brick building in a sketchy part of town was the city's first pizzeria and still stands as one of its oldest continually operating restaurants. That signature barbecue pizza and the endearing old-school Italian atmosphere contribute to that longevity.

Emil Coletta arrived in Memphis from Rome, Italy, in 1918 and opened Coletta's a few years later. He served sandwiches, spaghetti and meatballs, ravioli, and barbecue. Pizza didn't appear on the menu until the 1950s after his son Horest had taken over the business. Sailors stationed at what was then the Memphis Naval Air Station in Millington, about ten miles north of the city, had tasted pizza in Europe during the war and begun asking for it. So Horest went to Chicago to learn how to make it.

"It didn't go over too well at first," says Horest's son, Jerry Coletta, who's run the restaurant for the last several decades. Most of the customers had no idea what they were being served. "They would say, 'What's pizza?'"

Memphis Barbecue Pizza

This recipe is adapted from one the Coletta family shared with the Food Network.

MAKES ONE 16-INCH PIZZA, 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

DOUGH

1 (.25-ounce) package active dry yeast
¼ cup warm water (105° to 115°F)
3½ cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon salt
¼ cup olive oil
¾ cup warm water

TOPPINGS

2 cups Coletta's Barbecue Sauce, divided (recipe follows)
12 ounces shredded mozzarella cheese (3 cups)
2 ounces shredded mild Cheddar (½ cup)
1¼ pounds chopped pork shoulder barbecue

For the dough: In a small bowl, dissolve the yeast in the ¼ cup of water and set it aside until the mixture is foamy, about 10 minutes. In a large bowl, stir together the flour and salt. Make a well in the center of the flour mixture and pour in the yeast mixture, oil, and the ¾ cup of water. Stir with a wooden spoon until a rough ball of dough forms and pulls away cleanly from the side of the bowl. Pour the dough onto a lightly floured work surface. Knead the dough until it is smooth and satiny, 7 to 8 minutes, dusting it with flour if it feels sticky. Shape the dough into a ball, dust it lightly with flour, and place it in a large, clean bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and then a kitchen towel. Place the bowl in a warm spot to let the dough rise until it doubles in bulk, about 1½ hours.

Punch down the dough and pour it onto a lightly floured work surface. Knead the dough lightly for about 2 minutes. Roll or stretch the dough into a 16-inch circle that is about ¼ inch thick. Place the dough on a 16-inch flat pizza pan. Cover the dough with a clean towel and let it rest for 45 minutes before adding the toppings.

Assemble the pizza: Preheat the oven to 500°F.

Spread about one-third of the barbecue sauce evenly over the dough to within ½ inch of the edge. In a small bowl, mix the mozzarella and Cheddar and sprinkle them over the sauce.

Bake the pizza until crust is golden brown and cheese is bubbly, about 10 minutes. Remove the pizza from oven and sprinkle the barbecue over the cheese. Drizzle the remaining barbecue sauce evenly over the barbecue. Return the pizza to the oven and bake 5 minutes more. Serve at once.

Coletta's Barbecue Sauce

This sauce is a cross between pizza sauce and Memphis-style barbecue sauce. It yields almost twice the amount needed for this pizza, but it keeps for weeks in the refrigerator and is as versatile as any other barbecue sauce. Slather it on any grilled or roasted meat, or mix it with leftover barbecue and pasta for barbecue spaghetti.

MAKES ABOUT 3½ CUPS

2 cups ketchup
⅔ cup tomato puree
1 cup tomato paste
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
2 teaspoons white vinegar
6 whole cloves
1 medium onion, sliced
1 to 2 garlic cloves, crushed, or ½ to 1 teaspoon granulated garlic
4 teaspoons sugar
2 teaspoons dried basil
1 teaspoon salt, or to taste
1 teaspoon ground black pepper, or to taste
1½ cups water

In a large, heavy saucepan, stir together the ketchup, tomato puree, tomato paste, Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, cloves, onion, garlic, sugar, basil, salt, pepper, and water. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer, stirring frequently, until the mixture reduces to about 4 cups, about 20 minutes. Strain the sauce through a fine-mesh sieve and discard the solids. Let the sauce cool to room temperature and then cover and refrigerate. The sauce keeps for several weeks.

So Horest put a topping on that he knew people would like. He smoked and shredded pork shoulder meat, mixed it with a house-made barbecue sauce, and spread it over his crust, which had been sprinkled with cheese and prebaked. Barbecue pizza was a hit.

One of its biggest fans, according to Jerry, was Elvis Presley. He had a charge account there, and Priscilla Presley came in regularly to pick up the pizzas to take back to Graceland. Occasionally Elvis would come in with his entourage and dine at a long table in a room reserved for them.

Today, anyone can eat in the Elvis Room, where a life-size cardboard cutout of Elvis stands in a gold lamé suit, surrounded by walls filled with other likenesses of the King and by his music playing nonstop. The rest of the restaurant is tuned to a local radio station that plays 1950s and 1960s oldies.

Jerry's son and two daughters are carrying on the tradition in a second Coletta's location with a broader menu, which includes fancy steak and seafood dishes, low-carb marinated chicken, and four miniature barbecue pizzas on a plate served as an appetizer.

★ Cupboard Restaurant. 1400 Union Avenue. 901-276-8015.

From Union Avenue this Midtown eatery looks like the repurposed Shoney's that it is, but a drawing on the side of the building depicts farmers bringing bushel baskets of fresh-picked produce into Charles Cavallo's Cupboard Restaurant. Vegetables aplenty—cooked southern-style but without animal fat—are what you will find inside, along with rotating daily menus for meat-and-three and veggie plates plus homemade desserts.

Patrons file into the lobby, passing by boxes of Ripley (Tennessee) tomatoes and displays of deep-fried peanuts, local honey, and copies of *Charles Cavallo's World Famous Cupboard Cookbook*. The walls are jam-packed with photos of famous patrons—including Elvis, of course. Dinner is a quieter time than breakfast and lunch, when the restaurant is loaded with regulars, including movers and shakers from politics, the media, and business.

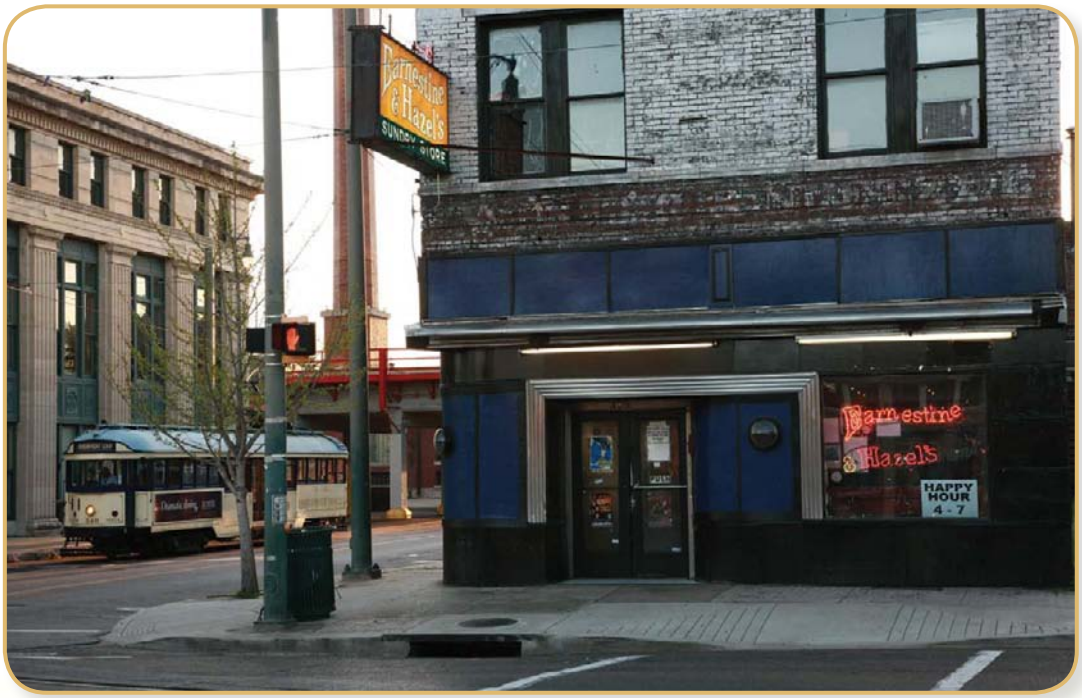
The Cupboard has been a Memphis standard since 1943. Charles Cavallo, who had owned a produce company, purchased the restaurant in 1992 and moved it from its much smaller location down the street in 2000. His love of fruits and vegetables is evident in a selection of seventeen vegetable sides available every day, plus three daily specials. Food is served on heavy, cafeteria-style plastic plates. Favorites include corn pudding, Italian spinach, and baked sweet potato. Entrées like smothered pork and stuffed bell peppers change daily. Lemon icebox pie stars for dessert, alongside sweet

potato, pecan, coconut meringue, and French silk. The breadbasket nearly steals the show, however: crispy-outside, creamy-inside pieces of cornbread plus yeasty, fresh-baked dinner rolls.

★ **Earnestine and Hazel's.** 531 South Main Street. Memphis. 901-523-9754.

Across the street from the circa-1919 Arcade in Memphis's Historic South Main Arts District is another building from that era where you can get a burger with a big helping of Memphis history. This one's not for the kids, though.

Before it became Earnestine and Hazel's, the building had been a pharmacy, a dry goods store, and a soda fountain. During the civil rights era, sisters Earnestine Mitchell and Hazel Jones turned the downstairs into a juke joint and served soul food. Upstairs, they ran a brothel, with a clientele that included many a bluesman who'd just stepped off the platform at Central Station. A photo of Howlin' Wolf with some of his admirers perched on his lap hangs on a wall. Supposedly, when the Rolling Stones dropped in, the ladies of the evening made such an impression it inspired their hit "Brown Sugar."



The building was boarded up for years, once the madams had left. In 1993 some entrepreneurs revived it as a funky juke joint, with occasional live entertainment. It's been a local favorite of the late-night set ever since. The White Stripes used it as a video setting, and Robert Duvall tangoed there after filming *A Family Thing* with James Earl Jones.

Open until three a.m., the place typically doesn't get cranked up until after midnight, when revelers head there to satisfy their munchies with the single house specialty: the Soul Burger. Many locals declare it the best burger in the city. Dressed with yellow mustard, onions, and dill pickle slices (cheese is optional), this basic burger arrives in a plastic basket with the one side offered: a bag of Golden Flake potato chips. Whether it's the mysterious seasoning in the silver shaker that raises its flavor a notch or the dill pickle juice rumored to clean the flat-top griddle on which it's fried, it's hard to say. Undoubtedly, its colorful surroundings enhance the perception.

Old pharmacy shelves line the walls. Employees swear that the jukebox has been known to kick on without prompting. According to one story, the community turned out for the funeral of a beloved street character named Freddie and then congregated afterward at Earnestine and Hazel's. Suddenly and inexplicably, the disembodied voice of Curtis Mayfield began serenading the mourners with his 1972 hit "Freddie's Dead."

Behind the pool table, a crooked stairway lit by a bare bulb leads to a hallway flanked by small rooms. Loudly painted and peeling badly, each is furnished with dingy old couches and chairs, console television sets, and ancient video games. On weekends, they're available for lounging.

At the end of the hallway, another door leads to a tiny restaurant called the Five Spot, where co-owner Russell George whips up gourmet feasts like grilled lamb chops and skillet shrimp behind the bar while regaling customers with old Memphis stories.

★ Four Way Restaurant. 998 Mississippi Boulevard. 901-507-1519.

The little parking lot that surrounds the Four Way Restaurant fills quickly on Sunday afternoons as nearby church services let out. Men in sharp suits, women in big hats and big jewelry, and children in their best bib and tucker file into this modest brick building with a sign advertising "Chitlins every Friday."

Inside, the chatter nearly drowns out the gospel music playing softly on an old radio. Ceiling fans twirl overhead. A rusty manual typewriter

perched on a shelf holds hand-written thank you notes from customers. The day's offerings are posted on an easel by the front counter: turkey and dressing, fried chicken, neck bones, meatloaf, turnip greens, black-eyed peas, candied yams, smothered cabbage, and catfish sandwiches (reputedly Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite). There's sweet potato pie and lemon meringue pie for dessert. They also have a house beverage, the V.I.P.: half lemonade and half sweet tea.

Established in 1946, the Four Way is just a few blocks from the Stax Museum of American Soul. For decades, the restaurant thrived as a gathering spot for families and recording artists, as well as Memphis's top black leaders and visiting dignitaries, who sometimes held meetings on its upper level. After Stax went bankrupt and many of the businesses in the area closed, the Four Way sat vacant for several years. It reopened in 2001, around the time a nonprofit group had formed to rebuild Stax Records and turn it into a museum. In the years since, it has honed its reputation for some of the best soul food in the city. Should you stop in when owner Willie Earl Bates isn't too busy, he can tell some great stories about the neighborhood and the famous guests who have frequented the Four Way.

Grisanti Family Restaurants

★ **Elfo's Restaurant.** 2285 South Germantown Road. Germantown. 901-753-4017. www.elfosrestaurant.com

★ **Frank Grisanti's.** Embassy Suites Hotel. 1022 Shady Grove Road. 901-761-9462. www.frankgrisanti.com

★ **Ronnie Grisanti's.** 2855 Poplar Ave. Closed in 2012.

Memphis has no shortage of Italian restaurants. None are so deeply ingrained in the fabric of the city as those owned by the Grisanti family. They've been at the forefront of the Memphis fine dining scene for more than a hundred years, with at least one restaurant open all that time.

This Memphis restaurant dynasty traces back to 1909, when Rinaldo and Mary Grisanti moved to Memphis from their native Tuscany and opened a restaurant on Main Street across from Central Station. Later their sons Elfo and "Big John" took over.

There are currently two Grisanti restaurants. Frank Grisanti's has been tucked in an Embassy Suites hotel in East Memphis for more than two decades and remains popular with Memphis's established, well-heeled set.

Miss Mary's Salad Dressing

Each of the Grisanti restaurants has its own personality, but all share the formula for the familiar signature dressing, of which there are countless similar variations in Italian restaurants throughout the Delta. Mixes of iceberg lettuce, chopped tomatoes, and sliced onions drenched in garlicky vinaigrette are often called "wet salads." A touch of red wine and lots of cracked black pepper have made this dressing a classic.

MAKES 1 CUP

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
¼ cup Regina red wine vinegar
2 tablespoons red wine
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
2 tablespoons finely chopped yellow onion
1½ teaspoons finely chopped garlic
2 teaspoons freshly cracked black pepper
1 teaspoon salt

In a small bowl, whisk together all of the ingredients. Serve at room temperature.

Frank's brother Ronnie's eponymous restaurant closed in 2012 after three decades. Ronnie's son Alex mans another in Old Germantown, named for Alex's grandfather.

Menus are a mix of Bolognese and Tuscan classics. A handful of heirloom dishes tie the restaurants together: Miss Mary's iceberg salad, the creation of the matriarch, tossed with a garlicky vinaigrette that's now bottled and sold in local supermarkets; the toasted ravioli appetizer with marinara dipping sauce; ultrarich baked manicotti stuffed with sausage, spinach, and cheese and covered in Bolognese sauce; and an extremely popular pasta and shrimp dish called Elfo's Special.

Elfo Grisanti, the son of Rinaldo, invented that dish many years ago, when a Catholic customer came in to his son Ronnie's restaurant on a Friday, seeking a dish that did not have red meat. There was nothing on the menu that filled the bill, so Elfo rustled up some linguini and tossed it with shrimp, mushrooms, and a few other things. The guest was delighted, and it earned a permanent spot on the menu. The recipe, incidentally, is widely available on the Internet and in a cookbook, *The Main Course* (www.frankgrisanti.com).

★ **Gus's World Famous Hot and Spicy Fried Chicken.** 310 South Front Street. 901-527-4877.

Forget getting any kind of consensus on where to find the best barbecue in the city. Ask a Memphian to name his favorite fried chicken, though, and the same name comes up time and again.

Gus's World Famous Hot and Spicy Fried Chicken serves a bird that's covered with a paper-thin, brittle crust that seals in the succulent juices and tingles your tongue without searing it. The secret recipe for that amazing, mahogany-hued chicken belongs to the Bonner family, proprietors of the

EasyNap

original Gus's in Mason, about thirty miles northeast of the city. Fried chicken connoisseurs from all over have made the pilgrimage to that shotgun house along Highway 70 to have Vernon "Gus" Bonner—or, now that he's deceased, one of his descendants—personally fry their chicken.

Gus's father and stepmother, Napoleon and Mary Magdalene Vanderbilt—better known as Na and Maggie—sold fried chicken at a tavern on Mason's town square in the early 1950s. Gus inherited the recipe and the business. *USA Today* has named Gus's fried chicken one of the top twenty meals in the country, the Food Network came to visit, and in 2001 *GQ* magazine deemed it one of the top ten meals in the world worth flying to another city for. Around that time, the Bonners opened their first franchise in downtown Memphis. There are now a half-dozen Gus's franchises scattered around west Tennessee and north Mississippi. The menu varies from one location to the next; some outlets offer full soul food menus with catfish and greens.

Fried chicken—white and dark meat, sold by the piece or in various combinations—is the only entrée option at the Gus's in downtown Memphis. Besides the usual accompaniments—baked beans, slaw, potato salad, French fries—they make a mean Cajun-spiced fried rice.

And if you're going for a serious burn, they'll sell you whole jalapenos for a quarter apiece.

★ **The Arcade.** 540 South Main Street. 901-526-5757. www.arcaderestaurant.com

The area now known as the Historic South Main Arts District used to buzz with activity generated by the Union and Central train stations. Union Station in particular was one of the city's architectural crown jewels. But as train travel waned, Union Station closed for good in the late 1960s, and the once-thriving area became virtually moribund.

When downtown began its comeback in the late 1980s, the South Main area, with its well-preserved architecture and views of the skyline and river, started attracting an arty crowd. Today it's filled with galleries, studios, boutiques, and restaurants. The National Civil Rights Museum, in the Lorraine Hotel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, is a major attraction.

Trolleys depart from the renovated Central Station, as does AMTRAK's *City of New Orleans*. Central Station is also the site of the hugely popular

Memphis Farmers Market, where on Saturday mornings you're likely to catch a chef's demo and some live music. Right across the street is the Arcade.

Founded by Greek immigrant Speros Zepatos in 1919 and now run by his grandson Harry and his wife, Karen, the Arcade is generally acknowledged to be Memphis's oldest café.

Its iconic neon signs and 1920s Greek Revival architecture have made it a favorite subject of photographers and filmmakers. The retro interior has a fun, cartoonish, pink-and-blue color scheme, with black and white tile floors, boomerang-patterned Formica tabletops, and turquoise leatherette seats. Blown-up black-and-white photos of Memphis's earlier days add to the nostalgic feel. But the waitresses are mostly young and hip.

The food is, for the most part, straightforward diner fare—hearty breakfasts, burgers, and milkshakes, plus daily specials like chicken and dumplings and country-fried steak. In recent years, they've added contemporary crowd-pleasers like chicken fingers for the kids, sandwiches, and pizza

by the slice with toppings like pesto, goat cheese, roasted eggplant, and walnuts.

Weekend mornings can get crowded, with tourists anxious to try the much-hyped sweet potato pancakes or photograph themselves in the booth once reserved for Elvis. Fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches—in honor of their famous former customer—is a menu staple. They make theirs with Texas toast.

Elvis's Peanut Butter and Banana Sandwich

Elvis Presley neither smoked, drank, nor partook in illegal drugs. He famously abused his body in other ways—primarily by overindulging in fatty, sugary foods. He once bragged to *Country Song Magazine* that he could pack away eight deluxe cheeseburgers, two BLTs, and three milk shakes in one sitting.

Cooks at Graceland were on call 24/7 to satisfy any craving that might arise at any hour of the day or night, especially for his favorite: fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches. In its most basic form, this treat was simply mashed banana mixed with creamy peanut butter smeared in between Wonder bread slices and griddled in a hot skillet of butter or bacon grease. But it took on many incarnations. Sometimes honey was mixed in to the peanut butter mixture; often extra-crisp bacon slices were added.

This deluxe version is adapted from the most basic one found in *The Presley Family Cookbook*, written by his uncle, Vester Presley, and longtime cook Nancy Rooks.

1 SANDWICH

2 to 3 tablespoons creamy peanut butter
½ ripe banana, mashed
2 to 3 bacon slices, fried crisp (Elvis liked his burned)
2 slices white or Hawaiian bread
1 to 2 tablespoons butter or bacon grease
1 tablespoon honey, plus more for dipping

In a small bowl, stir together the peanut butter and mashed banana. Spread on one slice of the bread. Top with the bacon and drizzle with the honey. Close the sandwich with the other slice of bread.

In a small skillet, heat the butter until sizzling. Fry the sandwich, turning once, until both sides are golden and crispy. Serve with additional honey for dipping.

★ The Little Tea Shop. 69 Monroe Avenue. 901-525-6000.

The menu at the Little Tea Shop is classic southern in every respect except one: No dish contains a speck of pork product, not even the turnip greens. The proprietor's Muslim faith prohibits it. But the lack of pork is no detriment here; Suhair Lauck has a subtle way with Middle Eastern seasonings that enhances her ingredients' natural goodness—sans the grease.

A fixture in downtown Memphis since 1918, the Little Tea Shop has long been a favorite of the power-lunch crowd. They love the delicious food, and they love Suhair—"Su" to her regulars. On each table is a plain paper menu that you mark with a stubby pencil, as if you're ordering sushi. The offerings are simple and straightforward: meatloaf with brown gravy, chicken and dressing, spaghetti and meatballs, vegetable plates, chicken or tuna salad stuffed in an avocado half or served in a sandwich. You can order turnip greens as a side dish or as a surprisingly satisfying vegetarian main course. The tender, wilted leaves arrive in a bowl, steeping in their aromatic potlikker, gussied up with chopped tomato and onion. The crusty golden corn sticks that accompany them are perfect for sopping up that potlikker.

The Tea Shop also counts among its specialties a wonderfully retro dish called the Lacy Special: tender sliced chicken breast layered between split corn sticks, next to a pyramid of rice, all doused in a translucent, herb-spiked gravy. Stewed okra and tomatoes, another favorite side dish, tastes fresh and not slimy, adding a bright splash of color to the plate.

There's peach cobbler for dessert, or the frozen pecan ball—a baseball-sized scoop of vanilla ice cream rolled in pecans and drenched in hot fudge sauce.

★ Wiles-Smith Pharmacy. 1635 Union Avenue. 901-278-6416.

Just down the road from Sun Studios, where many rock 'n' roll pioneers recorded their first hits, stands another shrine to that era. Set in a timeworn strip shopping center, Wiles-Smith Pharmacy proclaims itself as "Memphis's oldest independent drugstore." It is also said to be the last place in the area where you can sip an old-timey ice cream soda or milkshake while you wait for your prescription to be filled.

In a city filled with eateries sporting retro soda fountain motifs, Wiles-Smith Pharmacy, open since 1945, remains the real deal. There's no jukebox or neon art or bebop paraphernalia.

At the long, Formica-topped lunch counter, you can sit on a chrome-rimmed swivel stool and order a basic breakfast or simple sandwich for lunch: grilled cheese, BLT, egg salad, chicken salad—all freshly made. But the main attraction is the original soda fountain, where they still crank out ice cream sodas, lime and orange freezes (only in summer), and chocolate malts like it's 1961. That was the year Charles Smith began working at the pharmacy part-time while he was still in pharmacy school. A few years later, he owned it. He still runs it much as he always has, cheerfully stepping in as soda jerk in between filling prescriptions if he's short on help.

The sodas and sundaes are served in heavy ribbed tulip glasses set on vintage china plates; malts and freezes arrive in the good old gargantuan silver beakers they're blended in, with an empty glass, so you can pour your own refills.

★ **Woman's Exchange.** 88 Racine Street. 901-327-5681. www.womans-exchange.com

Enter this unassuming former home in Midtown Memphis and step into a time when hot lunch meant home cooking and hospitality—plus a beverage and dessert. The Woman's Exchange has been serving up southern favorites since 1962, but the legacy of the exchange goes back to 1885. First known as the Crafts Exchange, it was a place for women to sell their handicrafts. The shop is still filled with handmade children's clothing, books, and toys, as well as gifts, many sold on consignment for the artists and crafters.

Diners walk amid merchandise displays before reaching a cash register, where a volunteer points out a board printed with the day's offerings: perhaps beef tips over pasta, tossed salad and roll; vegetable plate with green beans, black-eyed peas, baked corn pudding, and okra and tomatoes; or a small salad plate with chicken salad finger sandwiches. And for dessert: caramel cake with fabulous real-deal icing. The lunches include beverage, dessert, and tax. There's no need to tip the servers, who are all volunteer members of the Woman's Exchange.

About thirty women across the country sew the children's clothing, including heirloom-quality christening gowns with the babies' names embroidered on them. The women arrange private parties and special events, such as English Teas, Fashion Shows, and Tutu Teas for little girls. Every holiday season they have a Christmas House, and they also have WE Consign, when they sell fine household items on consignment.

Woman's Exchange Bread Pudding with Lemon Cream Sauce

Restaurants throughout Memphis and the Delta have signature bread puddings. This one from the Woman's Exchange is exceptional, studded with golden raisins, laced with cinnamon, and topped with a luscious lemon custard sauce. This recipe is adapted from their cookbook, *Tea Room Treasures*.

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

PUDDING

4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter
4 large eggs
1½ cups plus 1 tablespoon sugar, divided
1¼ teaspoons ground cinnamon, divided
2 cups whole milk
6 to 8 slices firm white bread, crusts trimmed, torn into bite-size pieces (about 4 heaping cups)
½ cup golden raisins
1½ teaspoons pure vanilla extract

LEMON CREAM SAUCE

2 large egg yolks
⅓ cup sugar
⅓ cup butter, melted
1 tablespoon finely grated fresh lemon zest
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
⅓ cup heavy cream, whipped to stiff peaks

For the pudding: Preheat the oven to 400°F. Place butter in a 2-quart ovenproof casserole and let melt in the oven.

Meanwhile, in a large bowl, beat the eggs. Stir in 1½ cups of the sugar, 1 teaspoon of the cinnamon, and the milk. Fold in the bread, raisins, and vanilla. Pour into the prepared casserole. In a small bowl, stir together the remaining 1 tablespoon of sugar and the ¼ teaspoon of cinnamon and sprinkle them over the top.

Place the pudding in the oven and reduce the oven temperature to 350°F. Bake until the pudding is set, about 55 minutes. Meanwhile, make the sauce.

For the sauce: In the top of a double boiler, beat the egg yolks with a wire whisk until thick. Gradually beat in the sugar. Whisk in the melted butter, lemon zest, and lemon juice. Place over the bottom of the boiler filled less than half full of simmering water. Cook the mixture, whisking continuously, until it thickens slightly, 5 to 7 minutes. Let the sauce cool to room temperature and then fold in the whipped cream. Cover and chill until ready to serve over the warm bread pudding.

MADE IN MEMPHIS

DINSTUHL'S FINE CANDY

★ **Dinstuhl's Fine Candy Company, Inc.** (main location). 5280 Pleasant View. 901-377-2639; toll-free: 1-888-91-CANDY (22639). Other locations in Laurelwood Shopping Center and Germantown Village Square. www.dinstuhls.com

A cherished family recipe is the foundation for one of the city's most recognized cottage industries and enduring family businesses. In the early 1900s, Charles Martin Dinstuhl Sr., a German immigrant, opened an ice cream parlor here and developed a formula for fudge that has trickled down through five generations. His grandson, Edward Eugene, joined the business as a teenager during World War II and studied under prominent chocolatiers in New York to refine his technique. Their line has expanded with each successor, without veering far from the original artisanal methods. One of their chocolate makers has worked there more than fifty years.

Dinstuhl's is best known for chocolates, from the obligatory Easter bunnies and bonbons to chocolate-dipped fresh strawberries (they dip blackberries, pineapple, and raspberries as well, depending on the season). People also seek them out for the southern confectionary classics: pralines (they sweeten theirs with maple), peanut and pecan brittle, pecan logs, and divinity. Virtually every Memphis icon has been cast in Dinstuhl's chocolate: cotton bolls, pyramids, ducks, vinyl records, pigs, guitars, anything and everything Elvis related.

In 1983, they moved their candy-making operation from a 200-square-foot facility in the Laurelwood Shopping Center to an 11,000-square-foot kitchen with a small retail area in an industrial section of town. Tours of the kitchen can be arranged for groups of ten to thirty. Chocolate melts in ancient-looking copper kettles; stainless steel countertops are covered with works in progress like art class projects: chocolate-drizzled popcorn spread out to dry,

THE AMERICAN SUPERMARKET IS BORN

★ **The Pink Palace.** 3050 Central Ave. 901-636-2362. www.memphismuseums.org

In 1916, a flamboyant Memphis entrepreneur named Clarence Saunders founded Piggly Wiggly, the first self-service grocery store in the country. By 1922, there were 1,200 Piggly Wiggly stores in 29 states. Flush with success, Saunders designed a palatial mansion with a pink marble façade that was to be his residence. But before it was finished, some failed business dealings cost him both the franchise and his home. The company that acquired the property donated it to the city, and it's now part of the Pink Palace Family of Museums. The Pink Palace attracts 250,000 visitors a year and features exhibits on Memphis history, as well as a planetarium, nature center, science museum, and IMAX theater. Among the exhibits is a life-size replica of the original Piggly Wiggly, with shelves fully stocked with brands of yesteryear. About six hundred supermarkets throughout the South and Midwest still bear the Mr. Pig logo—which in Memphis blends right in with the barbecue signage so rampant in this pork-obsessed city.

chocolate houses being trimmed in jellybeans, truffle lollipops standing upside-down on sticks.

Dinstuhl's has multiple retail shops, and the candies are also available in gift shops, hotels, and pharmacies in Memphis and surrounding cities. You can also get them at the Memphis International Airport, or order them by mail.

POSTMODERN MEMPHIS

Like any major city, Memphis has its share of cutting-edge chefs pushing the envelope of creativity and embracing new influences. These places play up the best of contemporary culinary sensibilities while remaining true to the Memphis mind-set.

★ **Acre Restaurant.** 690 South Perkins. 901-818-2273. acrememphis.com

On the edge of a tony residential neighborhood behind Theatre Memphis and across from the Memphis Botanic Garden stands Acre, one of the city's

most talked about restaurants. The former residence was refurbished to reflect a casually refined, minimalist sensibility, with natural stone and buffed wood, earth-tone leather banquettes, arching doorways, and tall windows allowing in lots of natural light.

Chef/partner and general manager Wally Joe first drew national attention more than two decades ago at KC's, the restaurant he started with his family a hundred miles south of Memphis in Cleveland, Mississippi. Connoisseurs soon were arriving from all over, impressed with the establishment's elegant atmosphere and Wally's inventive, self-taught cooking. Wally became the first Mississippi chef to be invited to cook at the prestigious James Beard House in New York in 1994.

Wally started a second venture in Memphis, the eponymous Wally Joe, which was an immediate hit. But the restaurant became another casualty of the bad economy, and in 2010, KC's also folded. All the while, Wally stayed busy in the kitchen of Brushmark at the Brooks Museum, plotting his next move.

With several local partners, Wally opened Acre in spring 2011. Andrew Adams, who has cooked with him in all his restaurants, is executive chef, freeing up Wally to run the front of the house, although he still mans the stove on occasion. The menu shows that Wally continues to be guided more by his personal background and self-made style rather than current trends. A tiny octopus salad is offered as a starter, with pears, paprika cashews, cucumber, avocado, and spicy miso vinaigrette. The chicken galantine entrée is served with quinoa and maitake mushroom-crawfish ragu.

You won't find Memphis barbecue on this menu. But with ten days' notice, he'll prepare a roast suckling pig to serve up to a dozen guests.

Grilled Mississippi Quail with Fried Green Tomatoes and "BBQ" Balsamic Glaze

Wally Joe demonstrated this dish on the *Today Show* when KC's Restaurant in Cleveland was still open, to illustrate his sophisticated interpretation of Delta flavors, with a nod to his Chinese heritage. The spicy glaze is fantastic. If you don't happen to have veal stock handy, it's worth seeking out ready-made at a specialty foods store or ordering online. Beef consommé or rich chicken stock (or a combination) can be substituted with tasty enough results, though there's really no ideal substitute for the depth of flavor and viscosity of veal stock. When making at home, it is best to recruit a helper to fry the tomatoes while you prepare the quail; if that's not an option, fry the tomatoes and keep them warm while you grill the quail.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

QUAIL

2 tablespoons hoisin sauce
2 teaspoons sambal oelek
1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
1½ teaspoons Chinese five spice powder
½ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
4 semi-boneless quail, rinsed and patted dry (at least 4 ounces each)
½ cup diced red bell pepper
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

GLAZE

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
½ cup finely chopped onion
2 tablespoons very finely chopped carrot
2 tablespoons very finely chopped celery
2 cups dry red wine
1½ cups balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon mild chili powder
1 tablespoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste
1½ teaspoons paprika
¼ cup sugar
1 cup veal stock

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

½ cup yellow cornmeal
½ teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or taste
2 large eggs
8 large slices green tomato, each about ¼ inch thick
Vegetable oil for pan frying

For the quail: In a large bowl, whisk together the hoisin, sambal oelek, oil, five spice powder, salt, and pepper. Add the quail and toss to coat. Gently loosen the skin from the top of the quail and rub a little of the mixture over the meat. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours or up to overnight.

For the glaze: In a medium saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring often, until very tender and lightly browned, about 12 minutes. Stir in the carrot and celery and cook, stirring often, until tender, about 5 minutes. Do not let the vegetables get crispy. Stir in the red wine and cook at a low boil until the liquid reduces by half, about 25 minutes. Stir in the balsamic vinegar, chili powder, cumin, cayenne, paprika, and sugar and cook at a low boil until the liquid reduces by half, about 25 minutes. Stir in the stock and cook at a low boil until the sauce is thick enough to coat the back of the spoon, about 15 minutes. Taste the sauce to make sure that the sweet and sour flavors are balanced. Adjust the sauce with more vinegar or sugar, if needed. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool. Strain out solids if desired.

For the tomatoes: On a plate, stir together the cornmeal, salt, and pepper. On a second plate, whisk the eggs with a fork until they are well beaten. Working with one tomato slice at a time, coat them in egg and then lightly and evenly in the cornmeal mixture, gently shaking off any excess. Set aside in a single layer. Fill a large, heavy skillet with oil to a depth of 1 inch. Heat the oil to 350°F over medium-high heat. Gently slip the tomatoes into the oil. The slices should be able to float freely, so work in batches if necessary. Fry the tomatoes, turning them over once, until the coating is crisp and golden brown. Drain on a wire rack. Keep the tomatoes warm in a 200°F oven.

Preheat a grill to medium-high and generously oil the grate. Arrange the quail breast-side down in a single layer on the hottest portion of the grill. Cover and cook for 8 minutes, checking to make sure that the rub isn't burning. Turn the quail over and move them to the coolest portion of the grill. Cover and cook until the meat is just cooked through, 4 to 6 minutes more. An instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of a breast should register 130°F.

To assemble the dish: Place 2 slices of tomato on each serving plate. Cut each quail into quarters and arrange on top of the tomatoes. Drizzle the glaze over the quail. Scatter the bell pepper and thyme over the top and serve at once.

Variation: To roast the quail, preheat the oven to 450°F. Arrange the quail breast-side up on a wire rack set inside a rimmed baking sheet. Roast until the skin is crisp and deeply browned and the meat is just cooked through, about 10 minutes. An instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of a breast should register 130°F. Watch the quail carefully because the rub burns easily.

Brewed in Memphis

★ **Boscos Squared.** 2120 Madison Avenue. 901-432-2222. www.boscosbeer.com

★ **Ghost River Brewing.** 827 South Main Street. 901-278-0087. www.ghostriverbrewing.com

Craft beer has been slow to catch on in the Delta. But two lines of handmade brews, both originating in Memphis, have earned not only local fans but also respect in the broader beer universe as well. Chuck Skypeck, a home-brewing hobbyist turned brewmaster, is the brains behind both.

In 1992, Skypeck and restaurateur Jerry Feinstone opened Boscos, a pizza café, in the Memphis suburb of Germantown. Later they added locations in Midtown Memphis; Nashville and Franklin, Tennessee; and Little Rock, Arkansas (the Germantown flagship has since closed), all the while racking up gold medals at beer competitions. The handcrafted brews on tap are produced on the restaurant premises and in a nine-thousand-square-foot downtown brewery headquarters that opened in 2007.

This success laid the groundwork for Skypeck to create a second line of artisanal ales with a decidedly Memphis character. Ghost River Brewing gets its name from the water source used to make the beer: a section of the Wolf River about forty miles east of the city. That water flows through the Memphis Sands Aquifer, which has been supplying the city with pure, low-mineral drinking water for more than a century. Ghost River makes three regular brews (golden, brown, glacial pale ale) and one seasonal brew. Its signature canoe-paddle tap handles are found at more than fifty locations around Memphis and environs, and you can also get Ghost River in bottles. The company donates a portion of its proceeds to the Wolf River Conservancy, a Memphis-based nonprofit set up to ensure the ongoing quality of the river. Boscos and Ghost River products are sold by the keg and growler (half-gallon) at the downtown brewery.

Even if you're not a beer drinker, Boscos is a fun place to spend an evening. Inside, it's warm and cozy, with brick walls, dark wood and leather booths, and a glassed back wall exposing gleaming metal brewing vats. Outside, there's a lovely deck that overlooks a teeming nightlife scene. Critics give it high marks for fancy burgers, salads, and creative entrées, along with gourmet pizzas baked to order in that massive wood-fired stone oven. The "Germantown Purist" is their take on Memphis barbecue pizza, featuring barbecued chicken and shaved red onions with smoked and whole milk mozzarella.

★ **Brother Juniper's.** 3519 Walker Avenue. 901-324-0144. www.brotherjunipers.com

Tucked behind a flower-filled English patio garden and surrounded by a white picket fence, this cozy cottage fills up quickly on weekend mornings. Hour-plus waits are common for its wholesome, hippie-California-meets-southern breakfasts. Cheese grits and biscuits are staples. So are homemade granola and fresh fruit and yogurt parfaits, fresh-baked whole-grain breads, creative omelets, tofu scrambles, and fruit spreads made with organic ingredients. Whole-wheat biscuits are soft and fluffy, with sorghum offered on the side.

A Greek Orthodox priest started the first Brother Juniper's in the 1960s on Haight Street in San Francisco as an outreach program for the homeless, selling cups of coffee for a nickel and inexpensive sandwiches. Other Brother Juniper's locations sprouted up around the country, but today the two-decades-old Memphis location, near the University of Memphis, is the only one left. The Kaplan family, which owns it today, also sells a preservative-free vinegar-based barbecue sauce spiked with chipotle and molasses that has won honors at Memphis in May, as well as spreadable fruits, hot sauces, and locally roasted coffee bearing the Brother Juniper's label. And true to the philanthropic spirit of the original, it remains heavily involved in charity fund-raisers, with a bakery apprenticeship program for at-risk youth. Though typically open only for breakfast, they do dinner once a year—at Christmas, with customers, neighbors, and the homeless invited.

★ **Restaurant Iris.** 2146 Monroe Avenue. 901-590-2828. www.restaurantiris.com

Within walking distance of the theater and nightlife around Overton Square, this lovely old Victorian cottage would have been a dream location for any high-end restaurant.

But what sealed the deal for Kelly English was the fleur-de-lis embossed on its front door. The curly-haired, cherubic-faced young chef says he took that venerable symbol of France and New Orleans as a sign that this was the ideal spot for him to roll out an innovative French-Creole menu. Since Restaurant Iris opened in 2008, it has earned the highest ratings from every critic in town. In 2009 *Food and Wine* magazine named English one of the top new chefs in the country, and he was a semifinalist for the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef in the Southeast.

English's affection for the Crescent City and its flavors runs deep. A native of South Louisiana, English graduated from both Ole Miss and the

Culinary Institute of America and studied under chefs in Spain and France before returning to his roots. He trained with several superstar restaurateurs in the Crescent City before launching his own venture in the Victorian cottage, which had formerly housed La Tourelle, Memphis's longtime destination for French cuisine.

The New Orleans influences at Restaurant Iris are palpable. English makes his own boudin sausage with rabbit, pork, and rice; serves oysters and other seafood from the Gulf multiple ways; and does a killer bread pudding with brown butter and pecans. Pimm's Cup, the lemony drink garnished with cucumber popular at New Orleans's Napoleon House, is the house cocktail here.

Yet Restaurant Iris feels very much like a refined Memphis dining experience. Many of English's ingredients come from the Memphis Farmers Market, where he shops regularly, as well as the restaurant's backyard, where he tends an herb garden. He tops a beet salad with kudzu vinaigrette and local feta; pairs diver scallops with homegrown peas and Benton's bacon from Tennessee; and uses Delta Grind grits from nearby Water Valley, Mississippi, in several dishes. Most notably, he tops them with his father's version of Cajun-style veal grillades, along with a poached egg, on the Sunday brunch menu.

★ **The Beauty Shop.** 966 South Cooper Street. 901-272-7111.
www.thebeautyshoprestaurant.com

As far back as the 1940s, this storefront was the Atkins Beauty Salon, where a clientele that once included a young Priscilla Presley came to be coiffed. It closed its doors, as many surrounding businesses did, around the time that bouffants gave way to Farrah Fawcett bangs and in-towners fled to the burbs. It sat empty until celebrated restaurateur Karen Blockman Carrier spotted it, virtually unchanged. It stirred her imagination.

A decade after bringing the wildly popular Automatic Slim's Tonga Club to downtown in 1991, she wanted to try her hand at a neighborhood bistro. And she loved the idea of people eating and drinking in a setting once occupied by Memphis's best-tressed set. And indeed the furnishings have a lot to do with the Beauty Shop's appeal. Customers dine at a communal table in the center, in booths separated by glass-block walls, or in hair dryer chairs underneath space-age domed bonnets that stand upright and still. Original curvy mirrors are scrawled with daily specials, and beer is iced down in shampooing sinks behind the copperleaf bar. There's no neon here; modern

oversized blown-glass light fixtures provide dramatic bursts of color instead. The lighting is subdued and the lines clean and minimalist.

Like Carrier's other restaurants (Mollie Fontaine Lounge in a refurbished Victorian house and Do Sushi / Noodle Doodle Do next door to the Beauty Shop), there's a playfulness to the food, too, but it's prepared by chefs who clearly take their work seriously. Fresh and inspired sandwiches and salads dominate the lunch menu, and at night entrées run the gamut from quail with blood orange and fennel salad with pistachios to hubcap burgers. For a starter, Szechuan pepper and sugar–dusted chicken wings are coated in chile-lime sauce and paired with watermelon slices, blue cheese, and cashews. Caramelized cotton candy sugar tops crème brûlée for dessert.

If you have to wait for a table, Cooper-Young is a fun neighborhood to wander around. There's a longstanding music store with hard-to-find vinyl and its own record label (Goner Records); a bookstore dating to 1875 (Burke's); and a shelter for homeless cats where you can view dozens of felines roaming freely behind the storefront window (House of Mews). Or you can get a head start with an appetizer next door at Do Sushi—perhaps a locally inspired crawfish roll or Kobe beef slider with Japanese barbecue sauce.

★ **The Elegant Farmer.** 262 South Highland Street. 901-324-2221.
www.theelegantfarmerrestaurant.com

As one of the founders of the Memphis Farmers Market, longtime local restaurateur Mac Edwards was a proponent of "farm to table" long before the concept became trendy. In the spring of 2011, he began showcasing those homegrown products in a new restaurant he started called the Elegant Farmer. Housed in a former 1925 Tudor-style home close to the University of Memphis, the menu focuses on what they call "elevated comfort fare," made of ingredients whose suppliers are listed on the menu. A lunch signature is PB&J made entirely with products from regular vendors at the Saturday market: house-made pecan butter and pecan oil from Delta Pecan Orchard; blackberry preserves from Jones Orchard; and organic Shoaf's Loaf bread.

Salmon patties are made with wild-caught salmon and topped with Creole rémoulade; roast pork comes with cornbread pudding and braised turnip greens; a salad of roasted peaches, field greens, caramelized onions, and gorgonzola is tossed in a muscadine vinaigrette. Vegetable sides change with the seasons, and desserts depend on the daily whims of the pastry chef.

BLUE & WHITE
RESTAURANT

TUNICA AND ENVIRONS

Las Vegas of the South

IN THE NORTHERN PART of what was once the poorest county in the nation stands a castle trimmed in neon surrounded by a moat. A faux drawbridge leads into a shopping mall–size atrium that reverberates with the plink-plink of hundreds of slot machines. Follow the plush carpeting to the end, past gift shops and blackjack tables, and you reach an escalator that transports you to a Savannah-style veranda. Next to it is a kiosk, where you can buy a ticket that entitles you to help yourself to as many trips to the Paula Deen Buffet as your waistband will allow.

All-you-can-eat buffets, high-end steak houses, theme restaurants, chain coffee shops, and above all, casinos dominate the riverfront community of Tunica Resorts, once known as Robinsonville, about twenty miles south of Memphis on Highway 61. Within Harrah's Tunica casino, Deen's 560-seat shrine to deep-fried, butter-drenched, sugar-coated excess is the mother of them all—and emblematic of this county's transformation over the past couple of decades from famine to feast.

Harrah's, where the Food Network superstar's smiling, platinum-coiffed image beckons you to indulge at every turn, is the largest of the nine casinos that make up Tunica Resorts. Some are clustered together within

walking distance, others dot the miles of cotton and soybean fields. All attract big-name acts from Wayne Newton to Snoop Dogg to Wynonna Judd. Purple buses transport tourists toward a Harrah's water tower painted the same shade of grape, passing farmland, an RV park, a golf course, a manmade lake with spouting fountain, a skeet range, and a luxury hotel.

Riverboat gambling has been part of the culture here time out of mind. Nowadays, poker and blackjack are not only legal, they're what's keeping many a Delta community afloat.

Cotton farming had been a losing bet for decades, and in the early 1990s Mississippi legalized gambling. It wasn't long before the big Vegas gaming companies arrived and built sprawling theme park–like facilities atop huge barges (to comply with state laws) adjoining fancy hotels.

The dining options within them haven't dimmed the popularity of two of the area's oldest and best-loved eateries, the Blue and White Restaurant and the Hollywood Café. Both are so much a part of Tunica County culture that there's an exhibit devoted to them at the Tunica Museum, on Highway 61 south of town. It's well worth a stop, as is a visit to the steel-and-glass Tunica RiverPark closer to the casinos, which features a natural history museum, an ecotrail, and an observation deck that offers a stunning view of the Mississippi.

Casino dollars have reinvigorated the entire county. The town of Tunica (population: 1,000), ten miles south of the resorts, has a new city hall and fire station yet retains its old-timey charm. The tourist information center is in the dogtrot-style Tate Log House, built in 1840. Brick sidewalks, forest-green canvas awnings, and window boxes filled with fresh flowers spruce up Main Street—all two blocks of it. Interspersed between law offices and florists are gift stores, an embroidery shop, and antique emporiums. Several stately old homes nearby have been converted into luxury bed-and-breakfasts.

There were a couple of locally owned eateries in the business district when I visited: a diner and bakery that has since changed hands and the **Café Marie** (6195 Fox Island Road; 662-357-0988; thecafemarie.com), a cozy, casually upscale restaurant and special events venue that offers traditional and creative lunches and dinners and the occasional wine-tasting. Built in 1918 by W. R. Kirby and named for his wife, Marie, whose father, R. C. Irwin, was one of the city's founders, this former hotel was the center of society when the train ran through town a dozen times a day. W. C. Handy's orchestra sometimes played on weekends.

Tunica was a popular entertainment draw for other reasons. Among the Civil War–related sculptures in the attractively landscaped linear park across the street, a Delta Blues Trail Marker dedicated to Harold "Hardface" Clanton explains why. Nicknamed for the stone face he wore in poker games, the legendary African American casino operator ran a gambling operation renowned for featuring top blues artists, and his outside-the-law activities are credited with paving the way for legalized gambling in Tunica.

To get a better feel for the area's gaming history, take a detour to the remote fishing village along Moon Lake about twenty miles southwest of town. There you can book a room and make a dinner reservation at Uncle Henry's Place, a former Elks Lodge that once operated a casino and inspired a key scene in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Its resident historian, Sarah B. Wright, can fill your ear with many a dramatic story about the clandestine past of this quirky B and B and about the ghosts reputed to come back for an occasional visit.

★ **Blue and White Restaurant.** 1355 Highway 61 North. 662-363-1371. blueandwhiterestaurant.com

The Blue and White still looks a lot like the Pure gas station it was until the 1960s. Built of white-painted brick, with a steeply pitched bright blue roof and a giant retro neon sign over its canopy, the café within that station has been one of Tunica's most recognizable landmarks for more than seventy years.

Pure Oil built the first Blue and White café and filling station by the railroad tracks in 1925 on what was then Route 61 in downtown Tunica. Twelve years later it was moved to its present location on the newer highway. By the time Clarksdale native Steven Barbieri and business partner Joe Weiss took it over in 2002, the gas pumps were long gone and it was a café only—one that was, Barbieri said, "in need of a little shot in the arm."

Casino traffic had brought more customers, but the outdated kitchen struggled to handle the volume. So Barbieri and Weiss invested in modern cooking equipment and a computer system to improve efficiency, while keeping the old-time charm of the dining room and the menu of local favorites intact.

Gingham curtains hang in the windows. The counter and tabletops are Formica; the swivel stools and chairs, chrome and blue leatherette. Walls are covered with black-and-white photos depicting levee construction and

the vicissitudes of King Cotton, and newspaper stories about the grand opening of the restaurant's second—and present—location on December 9, 1937. Some of the crop dusters in the photographs were flown by pilots who still meet there every afternoon, at the same corner table, to drink coffee and reminisce.

The kitchen stays busy day and night, seven days a week. Some of the cooks have worked here more than forty years, several alongside daughters and granddaughters. Huge, puffy doughnuts—encrusted with sugary shards or coated in dark chocolate—are piled beneath the glass dome of the pedestal cake stand on the counter. They're made fresh daily, as are the sourdough yeast rolls, meringue-topped pies, and crispy corn sticks—perfect for dunking in the chunky vegetable soup.

The lengthy menu includes basics like fried chicken and rib-eyes, as well as chicken and dumplings, fried or sautéed frogs' legs, and catfish creole. There are eighteen side dishes to choose from, and you can wash it all down with an ice-cold glass of buttermilk instead of the usual sweet tea.

Blue and White's turnip greens are a particular source of pride. The leaves are stemmed and chopped by hand then steeped in pork-flavored juices for hours. They're served in a glorious heap, crowned with a square of fatback.

★ **The Hollywood Café.** 1585 Old Commerce Road. Robinsonville (Tunica Resorts). 662-363-1225. www.thehollywoodcafe.com

The 1991 pop hit "Walking in Memphis" is full of references familiar to anyone who's toured the river city's major music destinations: Elvis's Jungle Room at Graceland, blues legend W. C. Handy's statue on Beale Street, Sun Records' studio on Union Avenue. But even some lifelong Memphians are mystified by the lyric about Muriel playing her piano "every Friday at the Hollywood."

So who was Muriel? What was the Hollywood?

Fried Dill Pickles

The Hollywood Café is mum on their recipe for fried dill pickles, but these taste pretty close. They serve it, as most places do, with homemade ranch dressing for dipping.

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

1 (16-ounce) jar sliced dill pickles
1⅓ cups self-rising flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1⅓ cups beer
Peanut oil for deep-fat frying
Ranch dressing, for dipping (optional)

Drain the pickles and pat them dry with paper towels. In a medium bowl, stir together the flour, salt, garlic powder, black pepper, and cayenne. Add the beer and stir until smooth.

Heat the oil to 375°F in a deep-fat fryer. The pickles must be able to float freely in the hot oil, so working with about ½ cup at a time, dip the pickle slices into the batter. Fry the pickles until they are golden brown and float to the surface, 3 to 4 minutes. Drain well on paper towels. Serve with ranch dressing, if desired.

One night in the late 1980s, singer-songwriter Marc Cohn stopped in at a blocky white ramshackle building at the corner of Old Highway 61 and what's now Casino Strip Drive while a seventyish black gospel singer and pianist was performing. Muriel Davis Wilkins invited Cohn to join her in singing "Amazing Grace," an encounter that would inspire him to compose his career-launching ballad. That piano still graces the entrance of the Hollywood, as do photos of the two of them singing and playing together after his song had become a hit.

Another former patron, Mississippi-born novelist John Grisham, mentions the Hollywood in his legal thriller *A Time to Kill*. A copy of the book, open to page 288 with the passage highlighted, is in a glass case, opposite Muriel's piano.

The Hollywood opened in 1969 as a honky-tonk in Hollywood, Mississippi, a hamlet even tinier than Robinsonville, about five miles away. That building burned down in 1984, and the next year the café was resurrected in the old mercantile where it's still housed.

One thing that did not go down in flames was the recipe for the club's fried dill pickles. The way co-owner Mike Young tells it, their signature dish came about late one night when a customer at the bar wanted something to eat but the kitchen had run out of everything except dill pickles. So an industrious cook dunked the slices into some leftover batter and dropped them in hot oil. They turned out to be just the thing for chasing down with a cold beer and are now a staple throughout the Delta.

Since buying the Hollywood in the late 1980s, Young and business partner Mike Almond have spruced up the decor with watercolors of local scenes, expanded the menu, and added free Wi-Fi. But they left the hardwood floors, exposed-brick walls, and unpretentious atmosphere intact.

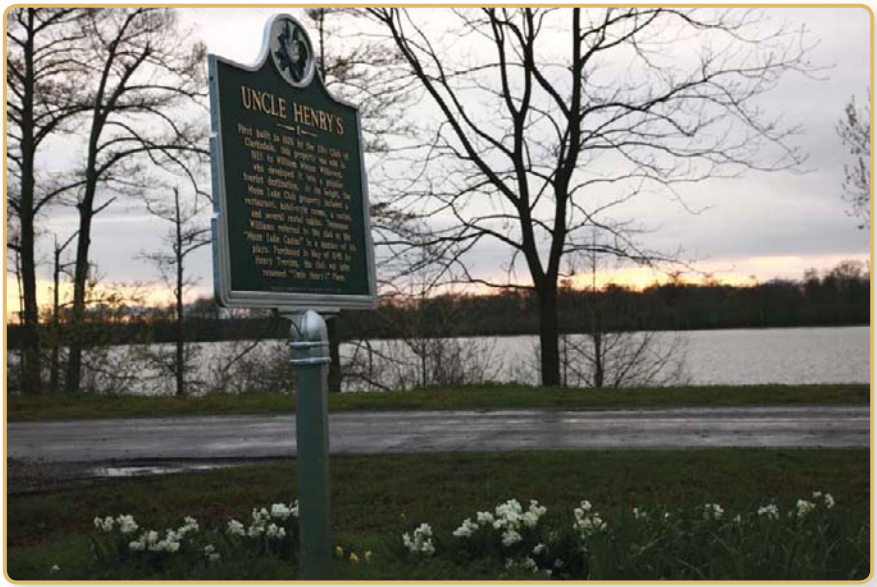
Besides fried pickles, the kitchen also takes care with its hand-cut fries, onion rings, catfish (fried or grilled), burgers, and that other locally popular oddity: deep-fried frog legs. They also do plate lunches that change daily, with notably fresh vegetables like creamed corn, steamed broccoli, and pickled beets. At night, they grill steaks and serve shrimp cocktail and a few other higher-end items. There is a full bar with a decent wine and beer list and a small stage with live acts on weekends.

But it's those pickles that people continue to seek out. By Young's calculations, they fry about 134,000 pickle slices a year. "I eat fried pickles wherever I go, to see what the competition's doing," he said. "There are a few places that are almost as good."

★ **Uncle Henry's Place Inn and Restaurant.** 5860 Moon Lake Road. Dundee. 662-337-2757.

Between Tunica and Clarksdale, and just across the bridge from Helena, Arkansas, lies the sleepy village of Moon Lake, a row of modest vacation homes separated by docks along a country road that eventually fades into farmland.

Fishermen come for the crappie and bass; writers and artists, for the inspiration and tranquility. But some come just to eat at Uncle Henry's Place, the weathered white clapboard inn and restaurant that's been a fixture since 1926. An Elks Lodge, and later a casino, it's known almost as much for its spectacular sunset views overlooking the mirror-like oxbow lake as for its Cajun fare and char-grilled steaks. Chef George Wright built his reputation for barbecued shrimp and étouffée in south Louisiana's bayou country, where he was raised. His mother, Sarah B. Wright, is the resident historian, who feeds guests hearty country breakfasts and regales them with tales of the Tunica area's storied past.



Literary connections abound here, a point the Wrights are wont to impress on visitors—especially during nearby Clarksdale's annual Mississippi Delta Tennessee Williams Festival, held each fall. Williams spent much of his childhood in Clarksdale, and frequent visits to this nearby lakeside community would later inspire a setting for several of his plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it was on the Moon Lake Casino dance floor that a drunken Blanche DuBois tells her young husband, Allan Grey, that she knows his deep, dark secret (he's gay). Moments later, he shoots himself by the edge of the lake.

During Prohibition, Uncle Henry's Place was the Moon Lake Club. Wealthy Memphians would come there to dance, gamble, and eat steak and lobster. That ended when the place turned out to have ties to the Chicago mob. In 1946, Mrs. Wright's foster father, Henry Trevino, and his wife, Vedah, reopened it as Henry's Place and for the next thirty years ran it as a family vacation spot, with a nightclub as well as cabins for sportsmen. The Wrights took over in the 1980s after the Trevinos retired.

Breakfast and dinner are served downstairs in an antique-filled dining room. Inn guests haul their luggage up a flight of rickety wood steps on the outside of the building. At the top, a door opens into a wide, cypress-paneled parlor that appears frozen in time. Tables are set with oversize checkerboards surrounded by comfortable old chairs. An open armoire reveals party

dresses from another era. An ancient phonograph stands next to a stack of records by Tommy Dorsey and Elvis. Behind the parlor are five simply appointed guest rooms, each with its own bath.

At some point, Mrs. Wright will likely lead guests to the backyard, bordered by a narrow waterway known as the Yazoo Pass, site of a significant Civil War episode. It was here that Union forces dynamited the Mississippi River levee so that gunboats could use Moon Lake and the Yazoo Pass to reach Vicksburg via the Coldwater, Tallahatchie, and Yazoo rivers. Confederate batteries thwarted those efforts at Fort Pemberton near Greenwood. Eventually the levee was repaired and Moon Lake remains intact, separate from the Mississippi.

Over a breakfast of fresh cantaloupe, bacon, eggs, and freshly baked biscuits, Mrs. Wright is apt to pull up a chair and tell guests a ghost story—like the one involving a gambling brawl that ended in murder right outside one of the rooms. The victim had a lame foot, and for years guests told of being awakened by what sounded like the tapping of a cane and a dragging foot.

She will probably mention other sounds reported over the years: rocking chairs creaking on the wood plank floors, the jukebox in the long-dormant Jitterbug Room kicking on inexplicably. One day she decided to take action. "I called my priest, and he came over and sprinkled holy water in all the rooms. We haven't heard the ghosts since."

But guests might just feel them.

WILD GAME COOK-OFF

★ **For all the development here,** most of Tunica County remains wild and rugged and prime hunting territory. The residents are enthusiastic about cooking what they catch, and the city sponsors a Wild Game Cook-Off each February. Entries in the large and small game categories have included beaver roll-ups and raccoon salad served with Hawaiian bread. Contestants have also found creative uses for rabbit, bobcat, crappie, frog legs, and squirrel. Nonhunters can participate. Awards are also presented for the best chili, wings, desserts, sweet tea, Bloody Marys, and margaritas.

Greg's Award-Winning Stuffed Venison

Greg Arnold, an avid deer hunter, took first place in the large game division of Main Street Tunica's 2008 Wild Game Cook-Off with this savory-sweet, stuffed, grilled venison recipe that calls for the backstrap, which is a tender, meaty cut from along the back. I tried it using his alternative suggestion of pork tenderloin with great results. The filling makes enough for at least 4 pounds of butterflied meat; you can either cut the filling in half or use the leftovers for a cracker spread.

MAKES 12 TO 16 SERVINGS

1 (3- to 4-pound) venison backstrap
Buttermilk, for soaking
Salt and ground black pepper, to taste
1 to 2 tablespoons minced fresh garlic
1 (8-ounce) can crushed pineapple, drained
1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, at room temperature
2 ounces pickled jalapeño chile slices, drained and chopped
1 pound thinly sliced maple-flavored bacon

Clean the backstrap by trimming away any sinew, silver skin, and membranes. Place the meat in a large bowl and cover it with buttermilk. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for 24 hours. Remove the meat from the buttermilk and wipe away the buttermilk that clings to the meat. Discard the buttermilk. Butterfly the meat by using a sharp knife to cut it down the center lengthwise so that it lies open like a book, taking care to not cut completely through. Season the meat with salt and pepper.

In a small bowl, stir together the garlic, pineapple, cream cheese, and chopped jalapeño. Spread the filling evenly over the backstrap, leaving a 1-inch border on all sides. Beginning with one long side, roll up the meat tightly into a cylinder. Wrap the bacon slices around the roll, slightly overlapping the parallel edges so that the meat is covered. Secure the ends of the slices with toothpicks or kitchen string.

Preheat a gas grill to medium-high heat. Grill the roll, turning it with tongs, until the bacon is seared on all sides. Reduce the heat to medium and continue grilling until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center of the meat registers 115° to 120°F for rare to medium-rare, 5 to 8 minutes per side. Transfer the meat to a cutting board, tent it loosely with foil, and let it rest for 10 to 15 minutes before slicing; the internal temperature will rise about 5 degrees as it rests. (Venison is very lean, so it is best not to cook it beyond medium-rare.) Cut into medallions and serve warm. This goes well with wild rice and vegetables of your choice.

Variation: You can replace the backstrap with four pork tenderloins, each weighing 12 to 16 ounces. Do not soak the pork in the buttermilk. Divide the filling among the butterflied tenderloins and then wrap each one in 3 or 4 slices of the bacon. After searing the bacon, grill the meat until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center registers 140°F for medium. Let the meat rest for 5 minutes before slicing.

Greg's notes: "To obtain venison backstrap, purchase 40 acres of woods in which to hunt deer, along with associated equipment—shotgun, rifle, muzzle loader, bow and arrows, truck, trailer, four wheeler, and assorted clothing. Rise early many mornings and sit in the woods in freezing cold temperatures for hours hoping to see a legal deer. This is a delicious, low-fat dish. Cost per serving is approximately $30,000 per pound. You may also wish to try the stuffing with pork tenderloin purchased at your local grocery store for about $3 per pound. This is delicious and low-fat as well and does not require any extra equipment."

CLARKSDALE

Cradle of the Blues, Crossroads of Cultures

WHEN I ASKED THE GENTLEMAN who answered the phone at the Riverside Hotel if he had any nonsmoking rooms available that evening, he told me what I needed to know. "If you don't smoke, then it's a nonsmoking room. If you do smoke, then it's a smoking room."

He was as polite as could be, but I detected a chuckle in his voice. Forced to decide on the spot if local color was worth the possible trade-off of tobacco-imbued sheets, I consulted Ralph, my husband, who would be along for the ride on this leg of my adventure: Of course it was. Otherwise, we'd be missing the whole point of this gritty little city's appeal.

Clarksdale, by all accounts, is the true cradle of the blues and the place where people from all over the world come to immerse themselves in everything associated with it, from the music, to the food, to the art, to the quirky river-town vibe. Hard-core roots music fans have always been drawn to the junction of highways 61 and 49, the famous crossroads where archetypal bluesman Robert Johnson supposedly traded his soul to the devil in exchange for musical mojo. In more recent years, actor Morgan Freeman's the famous native son who's gotten credit for enticing the world to visit.

Freeman grew up in a shotgun house near Charleston, the tiny town about thirty miles from Clarksdale where the Delta meets the hills. He spent Saturday afternoons in the balcony of a local movie theater—the only section blacks were allowed to occupy back then—watching cowboy flicks and dreaming of the day he could flee the Jim Crow South.

Decades later, the kid who had turned his dreams into movie stardom returned to the Delta and built a home on the property where he grew up. In the foreword to a weighty coffee table book called *Proud to Call Mississippi Home*, a collection of profiles of the state's most accomplished sons and daughters, he explained that he missed the relaxed pace, lush landscape, and people who "accept me as a friend instead of a celebrity."

Freeman decided to return the favor in a serious way by helping launch what became two of the region's best-known establishments—the audaciously upscale restaurant Madidi (randomly named after a national park in Bolivia) and Ground Zero Blues Club, both in Clarksdale.

Madidi opened in an old brick building in the middle of the sleepy business district in 2000, with classically trained chefs dishing out uptown dishes like rack of lamb and edamame and sweet corn succotash. Suddenly this obscure hard-luck town was appearing in newspapers and glossy food and travel magazines everywhere.

But Madidi never turned a profit, and after nearly twelve years, Freeman and business partner Bill Luckett, a local attorney, finally decided to call it quits. But their blues club is still going strong, as are other attractions fueled by the renaissance.

In 2002, Roger Stolle quit a corporate marketing job in St. Louis to move here and focus on promoting the music and the region that had become his passion. He opened Cat Head Delta Blues and Folk Art, a store specializing in homegrown CDs, DVDs, artwork, books, and gifts that has become for many blues aficionados a destination in itself.

Restaurants, folk art galleries, entertainment venues, and other Delta-flavored businesses have popped up around Blues Alley, which is anchored by the restored depot that has been the Delta Blues Museum since 1979. The list of local festivals grew.

So did the choice of funky places to stay. Ralph and I had, in fact, tried to book one of the much-ballyhooed refurbished shotgun houses that make up the **Shack-Up Inn** on the old **Hopson Plantation**, just off the highway on the fringes of town. Alas, every shack, we were told, was occupied by the Delta Blues Harmonica Jam Camp.

So we followed the map to Plan B, the Riverside Hotel. It led us to a run-down, two-level brick structure along the Sunflower River behind a broken Schlitz sign. On its tiny concrete porch was a rusty barbecue grill and a couple of ratty plastic chairs, but the Blues Trail marker nearby was the amenity we were hoping for. It was here, the marker explained, that blues empress Bessie Smith died in 1937, after her car crashed on the way to play a gig. Back then, the building was a hospital, one of the few in the area that would admit blacks.

We parked along the scruffy street and carried our luggage up to the rickety screen door. "Ring the bell and ask for 'Rat,'" instructed a handwritten note. Within a minute or so Frank Ratliff, a slight man with salt-and-pepper hair and an unlit cigarette dangling between his fingers, beckoned us inside.

The weekend before, Rat explained, with the Juke Joint Festival in full spate, all eighteen rooms had been booked. But tonight, we had the place to ourselves.

The hospitable Rat let us know right away that he could guarantee us a safe, comfortable stay. This had been his home since his mother, Z. L. "Momma" Hill, bought it and turned it into a hotel in 1944. Momma Hill allowed only men to stay in her hotel and considered them her sons. One of them was Ike Turner, who once lived in room 7.

Rat led us down a hallway decorated with fliers of past and upcoming events and with photos of lodgers famous and unfamous—several posed with him on the front porch under the faded blue letters spelling out "Riverside Hotel, Home of the Delta Blues." He gave us a tour of the rooms, each named for a notable who had stayed there: Muddy Waters. Sam Cooke. John F. Kennedy Jr. And, of course, Ike Turner.

All were neat as a pin and cozily decorated with worn but clean furniture. There were braided rugs on the creaky but newly refinished hardwood floors and ruffled curtains color-coordinated with the bedding and walls. Rat also proudly pointed out that if we opened any of the dresser drawers we would find items people had left there over the years. "When they come back, they're right where they left 'em," he said. "No one ever bothers a thing."

Ralph and I picked the Pop Staples room, equipped with a disco ball that spun with the flick of a switch. I peeked in a drawer, and sure enough, there was a hat, some ladies' toiletries, and a pair of clunky-heeled shoes from another era, still in the shoebox.

After we had settled in, Rat invited us into his apartment, where a newspaper was spread out on the couch and city brochures and fliers were stacked on the coffee table. He gave us enough dining and entertainment tips to last us for days. Wherever we ate, though, we should definitely make it to Ground Zero, he advised. There was some kind of harmonica convention going on, so it was sure to be hopping.

EATERIES WITH A CLARKSDALE PERSONALITY

★ **Abe's Bar-B-Q Drive-In.** 616 State Street. 662-624-9947; 662-624-5367. www.abesbbq.com

There are two landmarks at the intersection of highways 49 and 61 in Clarksdale. One is a cluster of three oversize guitars towering high on a signpost, marking the spot where fabled bluesman Robert Johnson supposedly made a deal with the devil to attain musical genius.

The other is Abe's Bar-B-Q Drive-In, with its faded wooden sign with bow-tie-wearing pig. It's been a favorite among blacks and whites since 1924, even during the days of segregation.

The guy who started what became Abe's was not your typical southern pit master. Lebanese immigrant Abraham Davis was a Clarksdale salesman who turned his hand to barbecue when he opened a tiny restaurant with a pit called the Bungalow Inn. Being adept at rolling grape leaves, Abe figured he could also master the art of the tamale from Mexican migrant workers. Sons Pat and Abe Jr. took over in 1959 and renamed the restaurant after their father, abiding by the recipes and techniques they'd inherited.

Abe's is known for its tangy, not-too-sweet barbecue sauce. But what really makes the 'cue distinctive is the texture of the meat. It is not pulled, like most barbecue in the area. Instead, Abe's smokes Boston butt over pecan wood or hickory for about ten hours, chills it overnight so the fat congeals, and slices it paper thin. The slices are reheated on a griddle and chopped as they sizzle, the fat is drained, and several squirts of sauce are added. The crispy-edged slivers are piled onto a grilled bun with a simple oil-and-vinegar-dressed slaw.

They also grill ribs, chicken, and burgers. Abe's tamales, produced by an outside company according to Abe Davis's original recipe, are made with pork rather than the more typical beef and rolled in cornhusks.

There's nothing on the menu to suggest the Davis family's ancestral home. But a handwritten note tacked on a bulletin board near the door offers one clue. It advertises trays of grape leaves to go, which are made by the retired Pat Davis Sr.

"It's an old family recipe," his son said. "My dad makes really good grape leaves."

★ Chamoun's Rest Haven Restaurant. 419 State Street. 662-624-8601.

With their towering, golden-tinged meringues, the coconut and chocolate pies lined up side-by-side in the pastry case at Chamoun's Rest Haven in Clarksdale draw dessert lovers from miles around.

People also come here for kibbee. A mainstay of Middle Eastern meals, kibbee is made of extra-lean ground beef, cracked wheat, olive oil, onion, and spices. You can eat it raw, bake it with pine nuts, stuff it into grape leaves, or form it into miniature torpedoes and fry it like croquettes.

From one end of the Delta to the other, families of Lebanese descent gather on Sundays to feast on kibbee, tabouli, grape leaves, and cabbage rolls, which often are cheek by jowl with the southern standbys they're accustomed to the other six days of the week. Such cross-cultural dining experiences are rarely available to outsiders. Even though a number of Lebanese have run eateries, most have served strictly southern fare in an effort to assimilate and saved their beloved gastronomic specialties for home.

The Rest Haven is an exception. Inside this quaint blond-brick building are worn but clean vinyl booths, Formica-topped tables, a linoleum floor, and a long counter with swivel bar stools. It has a lengthy menu that lists a broad range of options from the American South as well as the Mideast.

Chafik and Louise Chamoun came to the United States from Lebanon in 1954. Chafik opened a grocery store in Clarksdale, and for lunch Louise would send him off with kibbee tucked inside her homemade pita bread. Curious about this odd sandwich, customers began asking Louise if she would make them one too. Soon a few tables and chairs were added, and the Chamouns began offering a full-fledged lunch menu, with kibbee sandwiches as the main attraction.

In 1990, the Chamouns bought the Rest Haven. It's open for all three meals and offers full country breakfasts, steak, prime rib, catfish, spaghetti,

and those wondrous pies. The palm-sized croquettes of kibbee come studded with pine nuts and drizzled with hummus or yogurt. The tabouli—a lemony salad of cracked wheat, scallion, tomatoes, and tons of parsley—refreshes the palate, especially after many a side order of fatback-enriched greens. Besides pie, there's also baklava for dessert.

★ **Delta Amusement Parlor and Café.** 348 Delta Avenue. 662-627-1467.

The early 1990s were tough years for downtown Clarksdale. Several car dealerships, the JCPenney store, a local bank, and the Greyhound bus station either moved to the outskirts of town or pulled out for good. But the Delta Amusement Café, a fixture since 1969, stood strong. It's one of the first places visitors in search of the Clarksdale vibe are directed to, particularly for breakfast.

Delta Amusement has two rooms, each with its own bar. Before casinos came to the area, people came to Delta Amusement to play poker, dominoes, and other low-tech gambling games. Bobby Tarzi bought the café in 1988, and soon competition from the new gaming industry was forcing him to alter his own amusements and beef up his food offerings.

The food is no-frills but good. The pancakes are reliably fluffy and golden-brown, the bacon and eggs cooked just right, and the self-serve coffee is good and strong. Tarzi makes a mean pot of red beans and rice, an occasional lunch special.

Though his place is typically open only for breakfast and lunch, Tarzi hosts poker nights during Monday night football and Friday-night crawfish boils when the mudbugs are in season. Sometimes there's live music, too. On the night Blue Mother Tupelo played, "Love offering encouraged and deeply appreciated!" was the ticket price.

★ **Hicks' World Famous Hot Tamales.** 305 South State Street. 662-624-9887; 888-404-4257.

Eugene Hicks may be the most accommodating tamale maker in the Delta.

I was traveling with a friend who had never had a Mississippi hot tamale, and that was all he could talk about. I promised he would get his chance as soon as we got to Clarksdale. We drove straight to Hicks' World Famous Hot Tamales on Highway 61, a full-service restaurant with a drive-through window that sells everything from barbecue ribs and tips, to catfish, to crab cakes, to fried hog maw. They even make their own sausages.

But tamales is its claim to fame, even in a land that abounds with excellent examples. Hicks and wife, Betty, have been making tamales for decades. Much of the work is done by hand, although Hicks has developed contraptions for extruding and bundling them to meet demand.

When we arrived, we eagerly headed to the counter to place our order. The large, friendly guy at the register gave us the bad news: He had just sold his last tamale. A caravan headed to a NASCAR race had stopped in to fill their coolers and had wiped him clean out, he explained. He looked almost as dejected as my friend and me.

"But I'll have another batch ready by six o'clock," he assured us. I explained that we would be out for the evening and probably wouldn't be able to make it back in time. He was very apologetic and handed me his business card. "Well, you just call this number anytime," Eugene Hicks told me. "If I'm here, I'll let you in."

So the next day, on our way out of town, I called Hicks at nine a.m., two hours before they opened. It was pouring rain and we were in a rush, but we figured it was worth a shot. Hicks answered the phone.

"Why, sure, come on over, and I'll fix you right up," he said.

Dodging puddles, we crossed the parking lot and peeked in the window. The dining room was dark and the door was locked. But we gave a tap and within a minute Hicks was there to greet us. "Miz Wife, I need a half a dozen tamales," he called back through the kitchen window. A few minutes later, we were sitting at one of the little plastic tables, unwrapping the oil-slicked cornhusks. The moist cornmeal cylinders had a serious kick, with thick veins of chili-spiced meat running through them. Little bowls of chili and packets of saltines were served on the side.

Although the tamales on the menu are all-beef, Hicks also makes ground turkey tamales on request, and hunters sometimes hire him to tamalefy their venison. Hicks's tamales are spicier than most, but he will make a milder version with advance notice.

★ Oxbow Restaurant and Catering. 115 Third Street. 662-627-6781.

Hayden Hall cooked in high-end restaurants in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans before returning to Clarksdale to do his part to revitalize his hometown. In spring 2011, he and his wife, Erica, opened a casual little lunch spot downtown with changing specials fusing local and worldly flavors. The small chalkboard menu, and the space, have been growing ever since. Within a year it caught the attention of *People*, the Travel Channel,

and *Travel and Leisure* with innovations like black-eyed pea hummus and ahi tuna tacos with Sriracha aioli and ginger slaw. Local farmers supply some of the ingredients. Though Oxbow is primarily a lunch spot, the chef flexes his creative muscles on Monday nights with a roster of off-the-chain dinner specials.

★ **Ramon's.** 535 Oakhurst Street. 662-624-9230.

You can sit anywhere you like at Ramon's, so long as it's not the booth next to the kitchen. It's the one with the big rip in the vinyl upholstery, the whiskey-bottle table lamp, and the construction-paper artwork taped to the wall beside it. On any given evening, Sara and Meri Hollis Lawrence are apt to be sitting there while they wait for their dinner, doing schoolwork or playing with the toys and games they've pulled from the matching silver lunch boxes propped open on the Formica table.

"We call that the family booth," explained their mother, Scottie Ely Lawrence. "I used to sleep in that booth. Every day after school I would bring my homework, pillow, and blanket."

Scottie now helps her parents, Thomas and Barbara Ely, run the Italian restaurant they've owned since the 1960s. Its faithful followers love it as much for the utterly unpretentious atmosphere as for the wonderfully old-school Italian fare, which reflects Barbara's heritage, and the Delta batter-fried classics.

In a quiet, working-class neighborhood, this chocolate-brown rectangle of a building would never win an award for curb appeal, nor is the interior, with its warped linoleum floor and water-stained ceiling, exactly a showplace. Yet the Elys have created an invitingly cheerful atmosphere. Behind the bar is a wooden sign that reads "Ely's Tavern Place—Good Friends, Good Food, Great Beer."

Named after a former owner's son, Ramon's has been in Barbara Ely's family since 1948. Together she and Thomas have mastered the dishes their fans know and love: the crisp iceberg lettuce salad swimming in lemony homemade dressing; light and crispy onion rings; fried chicken livers; spaghetti served with Old World "tomato gravy" or tossed simply in olive oil and Parmesan cheese. But those butterflied shrimp—huge and juicy, sheathed in a light jacket of cornmeal—are extraordinary.

"Mom and Dad—they baby that shrimp," Scottie said. "The spaghetti gravy is Dad's recipe. I am learning how to make it now. I am not going to let this restaurant get out of this family."

They don't sell wine but provide wine glasses and plastic ice buckets for your table should you bring your own.

★ **Rust.** 218 Delta Avenue. 662-624-4784.

It's no mystery how Rust got its name. Much of the wall space in this downtown Clarksdale restaurant is occupied by rusted, broken, and outdated bits and pieces tossed out as junk: Half a mannequin. A grocery cart. Beehives. Broken chair legs. Church benches. Faded maps. A dismembered piano, turned on its side and spray-painted gold. The main dining room is darkly lit and flanked on both sides with booths and private dining rooms, some with curtains drawn. Tucked in the back is a bar where crowds gather to watch sports on the overhead TV.

The artful recycler was Randall Andrews, who'd been a personal chef in Los Angeles. For Rust he came up with a creative, Delta-focused menu that runs the gamut from fancy burgers to Creole-flavored seafood dishes. Though Andrews has since left to focus on other ventures, Rust has held

THE CHOW FAMILY

★ **SEVERAL DECADES AGO,** two Chinese sisters-in-law, Sally and Alice Chow, took cake decorating classes in two different cities. Sally was a home economics teacher and loved to bake. Eventually both moved to Clarksdale, where Sally was born, and they began baking wedding and specialty cakes. Since then they've been featured in *Southern Living* magazine, and their creations have graced the menus at local restaurants. Sally and Alice aren't the only accomplished cooks in the Chow family. The extended clan includes several avid gastronomes who've created home-style fusion dishes. In 2005 Sally and her husband, Gilroy Chow, demonstrated several of them in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival.

Yung Chow's Stir-Fried Collard Greens

While in most Delta households winter greens are typically simmered for hours with pork fat, Chinese families like the Chows discovered that greens were equally delicious prepared by Asian cooking methods. This recipe is adapted from one that acclaimed food writer Joan Nathan featured in a *New York Times* article about the Chow family in 2005. It's a wonderful side dish with other Chinese dishes and is great with fried chicken, too.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

3 pounds tender collard greens, stems removed, leaves washed and coarsely chopped
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon canola or vegetable oil
5 to 6 garlic cloves, chopped
½ teaspoon sugar, or to taste
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 tablespoons oyster sauce, or to taste

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add the greens and blanch them for about 1 minute. Transfer them to a colander and rinse under cold, running water until cool. Drain well and pat dry.

Heat a wok over high heat and sprinkle the inside with the salt, allowing it to brown slightly. Add the oil and swirl it around the wok. Add the chopped garlic, stirring until lightly browned. Add the collards and stir constantly, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the sugar. Season to taste with pepper. Stir in the oyster sauce. Remove the wok from the heat. The collards should be wilted but still bright green. Taste and adjust the seasonings as desired. Serve immediately.

on to its loyal following and signature items such as crawfish beignets with rémoulade sauce and the house dessert, a decadent square of genoise with butter cream frosting with one unlit candle stuck in the middle. "Chow Family (Ain't Ya Birthday) Birthday Cake" is how it's described on the menu. It's baked by Sally Chow, whose wedding and celebration cakes are prized throughout the Delta.

★ The Dutch Oven. 100 Blues Alley Lane. 662-621-9766. clarksdaledutchoven.com

The Dutch Oven sits along the tracks in what used to be a passenger train depot, a stone's throw from the former freight depot that houses the Delta Blues Museum. The paintings of cotton fields and sharecroppers' shacks that hang on the tomato-red walls of this squeaky-clean little eatery evoke its Deep South setting. But the menu conjures Middle America. The pimento cheese, though southern as can be, comes not on sliced white bread but on a fat, crescent-shaped butterhorn roll more like what you might find on an Iowa dairy farm than in the Delta. The soup of the day tastes of Pennsylvania Dutch country, bobbing with plump chunks of white-meat chicken, fresh carrot, and noodles as fat as dumplings. And the hand-crimped pies in the pastry case at the register—coconut cream, chess, French silk, fresh strawberry among them—look like blue-ribbon winners at a state fair.

The Dutch Oven is run by members of a Mennonite community that migrated to the Delta in the 1960s from Ohio, Michigan, and Kansas. Most are farmers and woodworkers known for their high-quality cabinetry.

At lunchtime, the dining room teems with neighborly chatter—between Mennonite families, local workers, students, and old-timers. Fresh-faced young women wearing long print dresses and black prayer caps scurry from kitchen to dining room, taking and delivering orders with quiet efficiency.

The regular menu consists mostly of classic salads, deli sandwiches, and wraps. But the daily specials, written on a blackboard behind the counter, make lunch here memorable. Each weekday features a different casserole: maybe Cajun shrimp and wild rice on Monday, poppyseed chicken on Tuesday. Soup specials also change; besides chicken noodle they offer cream of broccoli, white chili, loaded potato. And then there are the towering cakes—Italian cream, chocolate cream, carrot—competing for your attention with those wondrous pies in the glass case.

Mennonite Butterhorns

Southerners have always had a fondness for hot, soft, yeast rolls, so it is no surprise that the rich, tender butterhorn rolls baked by Mennonite women at both the Dutch Oven bakery and café in Clarksdale and Connie's Kitchen in Leland have been well received. At the Dutch Oven, they are extra-large, like a croissant, and filled with everything from pimento cheese to chicken salad. This archetypal recipe is based on several I found on Mennonite cooking websites.

MAKES 16 ROLLS

1 tablespoon active dry yeast
½ cup plus 2 teaspoons sugar, divided
¼ cup warm water (105° to 115°F)
1 cup milk
½ cup vegetable oil
3 large eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon salt
5 to 6 cups sifted all-purpose flour (plus more, as needed)
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted

In a small bowl dissolve the yeast and 2 teaspoons of the sugar in the warm water; set aside until foamy, about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat the milk with the oil in a small saucepan over medium heat until bubbles appear around the edge of the pan and the mixture is just about to boil. Let cool to lukewarm.

In another small bowl, beat eggs with ½ cup of the sugar and salt; set aside.

In a large bowl, stir together the dissolved yeast, milk mixture, and egg mixture until well combined. Gradually add flour, stirring to form a dough. Turn out dough on a floured surface and knead until smooth, dusting with more flour as necessary until dough is no longer sticky, 8 to 10 minutes. Shape into a ball and dust lightly with more flour. Transfer to a large, clean bowl and cover with a clean, damp kitchen towel or plastic wrap. Let rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour.

Punch down dough, knead a few times and reshape in a ball, cover, and let rise until almost doubled again, about 1 hour. Brush two baking sheets with some of the butter and set aside.

Turn out dough onto a clean surface, divide dough in half, and shape each piece into a ball. Roll each dough ball into a 14-inch circle about ¼-inch thick and brush with more of the butter. Using a pizza wheel or a sharp knife, cut each circle into 8 wedges, making 16 wedges in all.

Roll up each wedge, starting with the wide edge, and make sure the pointed end is tucked and pinched under the roll to keep it from unrolling. Set rolls on the buttered baking sheets about 2 inches apart. Brush the tops and sides with remaining butter. Loosely cover the rolls with clean, damp kitchen towels or plastic wrap, and let rise in a warm place until almost doubled, for about 45 minutes.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Bake rolls 12 to 15 minutes, or until golden and cooked through. Serve hot from the oven for dinner rolls, or let cool, slice open, and fill with pimento cheese, chicken salad, or other sandwich filling.

★ **The Ranchero.** 1907 North State Street. 662-624-9768.

The name may sound like a cheesy Tex-Mex chain, but the Ranchero—"the Ranch" to everyone who lives here—is pure Clarksdale. It's as beloved for the nostalgia factor as it is the familiar Delta favorites. Here in these paneled rooms crammed with old newspaper clippings and sports memorabilia, you'll find a lengthy roster of all the classics: steaks, seafood, onion rings, barbecue, plate lunches, pasta, all-you-can-eat catfish on Fridays. Nelms Mitchell catered mostly to teens when he opened it in 1959, in a one-room cement block building. Now his daughter is at the helm, in a larger facility with a special events room and Wi-Fi. Many of those original customers still count themselves as regulars, as do their kids and grandkids. Open throughout the day and well into the evening every day but Sunday, it's a reliable bet at odd times when most other places are closed.

OFFBEAT TASTES BEYOND RESTAURANTS

Restaurants aren't the only places that serve local flavor. These businesses show their hospitality without a formal menu or regular hours.

★ **Hopson Commissary / The Loft.** Hopson-Pixley Road. 662-624-5756. www.hopsonplantation.com

★ **Shack-Up Inn / The Loft.** 001 Commissary Circle. 662-624-8329. www.shackupinn.com

At the old Hopson Plantation off Highway 49 about four miles outside of Clarksdale, "B&B" takes on a couple of different meanings. For fifty dollars a night, the Shack Up Inn gets you "Bed and Beer" in a refurbished tin-roofed shotgun house or a room in a former cotton gin, each outfitted with antiques, basic creature comforts, and a cooler of cold ones. (You get a Moon Pie instead of a mint on your pillow.)

On the same property is the Hopson Commissary, and there "B&B" can mean "Barbecue and Blues," depending on the night. James and Cathy Butler have converted the former country grocery store into a lively club. Most weekends you can listen to live music and indulge in a barbecue buffet with all the fixings on tables set with red-and-white-checkered

tablecloths. On the nights they're open for dinner (check the website or call for the latest schedule), James barbecues his Boston butts for twenty-four hours on a smoker fashioned from a 1950 Allis-Chalmers tractor.

In the early twentieth century, the Delta was covered with plantations like Hopson. They operated much like small towns, with commissaries selling groceries, with mule barns, and with shotgun shacks for the thousands of field hands who worked the cotton crops.

In the 1940s, Hopson was among the first plantations to mechanize, a major cause of the Great Migration northward. Lots of shacks were left vacant to decay.

James Butler, a Clarksdale native who married into the Hopson family, wanted to preserve some of these buildings. But there were so few left that he and some partners bought shacks from other plantations and moved them onto the property. The partners repaired and furnished them with flea-market finds and turned them into a funky motel they named the Shack Up Inn. Bill Talbot, one of the other partners, now operates the Shack Up, which has expanded to include rooms carved from a bin attached to an old cotton gin.

Besides hosting events at the commissary, the Butlers (who are no longer affiliated with the Shack Up Inn) offer lodging next to the shacks at the Loft—a two-story, tin-roofed building with a rambling wooden porch and a full kitchen, furnished with antiques, quilts, an old piano, and cool folk art.

Hopson Commissary Pulled Pork BBQ Sandwiches

On weekends when bands are playing, or for special functions, James and Cathy Butler put out a spread that features Butler's barbecue that he prepares on a rig he made from an old tractor. His is a 24-hour process; here we have adapted his recipe for a backyard setup.

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

CAJUN-STYLE BARBECUE SEASONING RUB

2 tablespoons kosher salt
2 tablespoons cracked black pepper
2 tablespoons ground paprika
1½ teaspoons cayenne pepper
1½ teaspoons garlic powder
1½ teaspoons onion powder
1½ teaspoons white pepper

WET MOP

1 cup cider vinegar
½ cup water
2 to 3 tablespoons Cajun-Style Barbecue Seasoning Rub
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon dry mustard

MEAT AND SANDWICHES

1 (6- to 8-pound) bone-in Boston butt
2 to 3 whole pickled jalapeño chiles, stemmed and cut into slivers (3 to 4 tablespoons)
Quick and Spicy Barbecue Sauce (recipe follows)
Hamburger buns, for serving
Slaw, for serving (optional)

For the rub: In a small bowl, stir together all of the ingredients.

For the mop: In a medium bowl, stir together all of the ingredients until the sugar dissolves.

For the meat and sandwiches: Cut deep slits all over the roast with the tip of a sharp paring knife and insert jalapeño slivers into the slits. Sprinkle the roast on all sides with 3 or 4 tablespoons of the Seasoning Rub and rub it into the meat. Cover the roast with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight.

Prepare a smoker and let it come to 200°F. Remove the pork from the refrigerator and let it come to room temperature. Rub another tablespoon of the Seasoning Rub into the meat. Place the roast on a rack, fat-side up. (Many people use disposable aluminum roasting pans in their smokers to avoid blackening their good roasting pans.) Smoke the meat at 200°F for 6 hours.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Place the roast on several thicknesses of foil and pour 1 cup of the Wet Mop over the meat. Wrap up the roast tightly in the foil, return it to the roasting pan, and roast until the meat reaches an internal temperature of 160°F, 2 to 3 hours, basting occasionally with more Wet Mop.

Remove the roast from the oven, unwrap it, and place it on a cutting board. With two forks or your fingers (wear rubber gloves), pull the meat from the bone and shred it into bite-sized pieces. Toss with enough Quick and Spicy Barbecue Sauce to moisten the meat, or to taste.

To assemble the sandwiches, divide the meat among hamburger buns. Top with slaw, if desired. Serve the leftover sauce on the side.

Quick and Spicy Barbecue Sauce

MAKES ABOUT 2½ CUPS SAUCE

2 cups ketchup
½ cup Worcestershire sauce
½ cup cider vinegar
¼ cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons yellow mustard
2 tablespoons molasses
1 tablespoon chili powder
2 to 3 teaspoons Cajun-Style Barbecue Seasoning, or to taste

In a medium saucepan, combine all ingredients. Bring the sauce to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and gently simmer, uncovered, until the sauce thickens slightly, 20 to 30 minutes. Serve warm or let cool to room temperature and then cover and refrigerate. The sauce keeps for several months.

★ **Miss Del's General Store.** 145 Delta Avenue. 662-624-2381. www.missdels.com

The Delta is full of old brick buildings with tin awnings that once served as commissaries, where locals came to buy everything from grocery staples, to overalls, to seed and feed. Several have been converted into restaurants and clubs.

Miss Del's is one of the few that continues to function as a general store—of sorts. The front is a forest of decorative bottle trees for sale and ceiling-high racks crowded with potted plants and herbs. A mural of the store's original incarnation, complete with vintage blue pickup parked in front, adorns one wall. The day I visited, a sporty red convertible Mustang occupied the actual spot. I pulled up just as a woman with two black standard poodles was stepping out of it—owner Shonda Warner and the well-mannered greeters, Walter and Henry.

Warner opened Miss Del's in 2004 largely as an adjunct to her main passion: gardening. She was instrumental in launching the Clarksdale Farmers Market and sells a wide array of organic fertilizers and seed and gardening supplies. In season you'll find homegrown vegetables. For the rest, her merchandise is an attractively displayed hodgepodge that includes locally produced Wardell's spiced pecans in pretty tins (with free samples at the register), truffle oil, artisanal cheeses, and fancy imported Rococo organic chocolates from the United Kingdom. Scattered among the food products are sophisticated oddments like books, jewelry, handbags, and aromatherapy products. More recently, Warner had added a bridal registry and opened Miss Del's Garden Center in a former Texaco gas station around the corner.

★ **Quapaw Canoe Company.** 291 Sunflower Avenue. 662-627-4070. www.island63.com

John Ruskey isn't a chef, but over the years he's treated thousands of people to meals in settings that tell a Delta story that's as close to the source as you can get. As owner of the Quapaw Canoe Company, located next to the Sunflower River across the street from Cat Head Records, he may be the South's best-known river guide and campfire cook. He's been featured in *National Geographic* and *Outside* magazines, and he once led TV personality Alton Brown down the river and fed him steak grilled over willow leaves.

Ruskey carves the canoes himself out of cedar logs and also teaches Delta kids the craft, along with wilderness survival skills, in an after-school apprenticeship program. A back door leads into a cave-like labyrinth of rooms—a jumble of books, gear, maps, shells, paintbrushes and paints, and

some of his watercolors in progress. There's also a guitar and an accordion lying about, both of which he plays, often on a sandbar in front of a campfire.

Born and raised in the Rockies, Ruskey literally washed up on these banks more than two decades ago when, after graduating from a New England prep school, he and a friend floated down the Mississippi on a homemade raft. He loved everything about the Delta: its ethereal landscape, its friendly people, its earthy music, its soulful vibe. After he earned his philosophy degree from a college in New Mexico, he landed a job in Clarksdale as the Delta Blues Museum's first curator. In 1998 he began offering river tours, which now run the gamut from easy picnicking daytrips to weeklong high adventures. Their Muddy Waters Wilderness Tour includes a shuttle stop at the Stovall Plantation where McKinley Morganfield (better known as Muddy Waters) spent his early life. The blues great's original cabin, made of hand-hewn cypress logs, is now the centerpiece of the Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum.

Eating well throughout the day is a big priority for Ruskey and his crews. Every day on the river begins with a pot of "cowboy coffee," which involves brewing two pots of water in special pots, one with unfiltered chicory grounds thrown in. Breakfast could be bacon and eggs cooked together in one skillet or yogurt and muesli with fresh fruit. For lunch, he assembles picnic spreads of cold cuts, cheeses, fruits and crudités, bread, and chips. When the paddlers dock for the evening, Ruskey typically rewards them with grilled steaks—beef, lamb, or deer. Wine and spirits are optional. He's also adept at frying and blackening catfish and cooking up all manner of vegetable and meat stews in his hulking Dutch oven set over a roaring fire.

Ruskey regularly hosts community-wide events on the riverbank throughout the year. Most have a fund-raising component for his apprenticeship

program or for river maintenance. In late December, he invites the public to the Mighty Quapaw Winter Solstice Bonfire, to watch the sun set, listen to live music, and share a feast of cheeses, breads, smoked fish, wild meats, spiced apple cider, and "Quapaw Willow-Smoked Community Coffee."

TWO MUSIC VENUES

★ **Ground Zero Blues Club.** 0 Blues Alley. 662-621-9009. www.groundzerobluesclub.com

Ground Zero Blues Club is so named because Clarksdale has always been known as the ultimate locus for the blues. Purists sneer that this brainchild of actor Morgan Freeman and local attorney Bill Luckett is mass entertainment, not a real juke joint or blues club. If it were truly authentic, it would be in a shack, not a fifteen-thousand-square-foot former cotton-grading warehouse in the middle of town. It would not have a stage with a state-of-the-art sound system, beer would not flow from multiple taps behind a bar, and you couldn't order a Voodoo Burger or Fried Green Tomato "Sammich."

Those ratty sofas and chairs on the raised concrete porch were picked to fit the *Sanford and Son* motif its owners sought, not because they couldn't afford better. The graffiti-scrawled walls littered with old blues posters, the vinyl-covered metal tables with mismatched chairs, and the colored Christmas lights dangling from the rafters—all part of the scheme.

On the other hand, there was nothing contrived about the passion of the blues harp players jamming the night my husband and I dropped in. A high-energy party mood prevailed throughout the diverse crowd of locals and tourists as they danced, shot pool, or mixed on the periphery.

Ground Zero prevails as the place to go for anyone who wants to hear the blues without living the blues. But there are other options.

★ **Red's Lounge.** Corner of Sunflower Avenue and MLK Drive.

For the more adventurous traveler in search of the raw, unsanitized juke joint experience, the recommendation that comes up most frequently is Red's. Run by Leroy "Red" Paden, it's a rather forbidding-looking brick building next to a cemetery, with junky old grills on the front porch, no lights, and no sign (other than some graffiti that says "No Drugs"). Not even a phone number, apparently. Red's is one of those places that pretty much opens when it feels like it. There's a house band, a pool table, beer for sale,

some bare-bones furniture. One fan on the Internet described Red's as "one big ol' house party" where "everyone participates freely. You can sing along if you want, shoot some pool, dance by yourself or with someone, or just drink some beer. No one pays you no nevermind, it's just another night of blues in the land where the blues began."

Though Red's typically does not serve food, it does put those grills to use during festivals or when the spirit moves. I hear Red's ribs and pecan-smoked chicken are mighty fine.

KIM'S PORK RINDS

★ **Kim's Pork Rinds and Cracklins.** 662-627-2389.

In the 1960s, Kim and Jean Wong started a new life in Clarksdale the way most Chinese immigrants who came to the Delta before them had done—by opening a grocery store and restaurant. At night, Kim supplemented their income by teaching karate to kids.

In their kitchen they would stir-fry meat and vegetables for sweet-and-sour pork as well as fry chicken and render lard for southern-style biscuits. Jean would reserve the melted fat left from the pork and toss out the remnants from the bottom of the pan.

And then her husband had a lightbulb moment: Those crispy bits, or cracklings, were an ingredient much loved by many of their southern-bred neighbors, who liked to fold them into cornbread batter and other dishes for crunchy bursts of intensely salty, oily pork flavor. So instead of pitching them, they packaged them in zip-top bags to sell in their grocery store. Kim Wong also thought he'd give pork rinds a try, using the same technique as for the cracklings.

"They were selling so well, we closed the restaurant and only sold the pork rinds," says his son John, who now runs the little processing plant in the middle of town. The Wongs' timing was good, too, with sales of the rinds boosted by the Atkins diet craze and former president George H. W. Bush's proclamation of his affinity for pork rinds. The Wongs got a visit from the *Today* show's Al Roker and requests from the White House for a shipment. Now the pork rinds are carried in more than a dozen states, along with their cracklings and fried chicken skins. Key to the great taste of their wares, they say, is their special Asian-accented seasoning blend and the gargantuan woks they use, which they claim results in a crispier product.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS FESTIVAL

★ **CLARKSDALE** probably has more annual festivals than anyplace in the Delta, most of them, unsurprisingly, highlighting blues and gospel music. But it also hosts the annual Mississippi Delta Tennessee Williams Festival each October, honoring the Pulitzer Prize–winning author and playwright, who spent much of his childhood here. While he made clear on numerous occasions that he was only too happy to have left the Delta, the region and its people clearly made a significant impression on him.

Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* was based on a friend of Williams's mother in Clarksdale. Brick, the alcoholic athlete played by Paul Newman in the 1958 movie version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, was inspired by a bully who bedeviled Williams at Oakhurst Elementary. Blanche, Baby Doll, and Amanda Wingfield were also based on Clarksdale residents.

The festival, put on by Coahoma Community College, features a Stella shouting contest, acting competitions, porch plays, and scholarly panel discussions about Williams's works and his life.

Food figures prominently in the festival and has typically included a barbecue, desserts, and a buffet representing Clarksdale's major ethnic groups: Lebanese, Chinese, Italian, Jewish. One year, local chefs demonstrated foods and drinks mentioned in Williams's plays, like Big Daddy's hot buttered biscuits and Hoppin' John and Maxine's rum-cocos.

The playwright himself was an enthusiastic gastronome, as one of his longtime friends, the film critic Rex Reed, observed in a 2001 essay for *Gourmet* magazine. But that passion for food was not something he picked up at the family dinner table. According to Reed, Williams "once described his mother, Edwina, a faded steel magnolia immortalized as the cloying Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, as 'an old trout terminally allergic to the kitchen, with the uncanny ability to make tinned soup taste like dishwasher detergent.'"

So Williams ate out a lot and taught himself to cook, mostly from spiral-bound community cookbooks. He once prepared for Reed smothered roast beef and a Girl Scout recipe for lemon icebox pie with vanilla wafer crust. To this day, lemon icebox pie is a staple all over the Delta—you'll even find it at service stations. More often than not, it's piled extra-high with billowy meringue, like this excellent version, adapted from one Rex Reed provided *Gourmet* magazine.

Tennessee Williams's Lemon Ice Box Pie

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

1½ cups finely crushed vanilla wafer crumbs
¼ pound (1 stick) lightly salted butter, melted
4 large egg yolks
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
4 teaspoons lightly packed, finely grated fresh lemon zest
½ cup fresh lemon juice
6 large egg whites, at room temperature
½ teaspoon cream of tartar
½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
¾ cup sugar

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a small bowl, toss the crumbs and butter. Pour into a 9-inch pie plate and press firmly across the bottom and up the sides.

In a large bowl, whisk together the egg yolks and condensed milk. Add the lemon zest and lemon juice and whisk until smooth. Scrape the filling into the pie shell. Bake for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, make the meringue. In a large glass or metal bowl, beat the egg whites, cream of tartar, and vanilla with an electric mixer set to medium speed until the whites are cloudy. Increase the speed to high and beat the whites to soft peaks. With the mixer running, add the sugar in a slow, steady stream. Beat the whites to stiff peaks. Spoon the meringue over the warm pie, spreading it to the edge of the crust and mounding it in the center. Make attractive peaks and swirls with the back of the spoon.

Continue baking the pie until the meringue is lightly browned, about 20 minutes more. Cool the pie to room temperature on a wire rack and then refrigerate until well chilled, at least 4 hours. Cut the pie with a sharp knife dipped into hot water and serve chilled.

COMO

Hill Town with a Delta Rhythm

COMO'S DEPOT DISAPPEARED with the cotton commerce after the Great Depression. Gone are the days when this hill town on the edge of the Delta could claim more millionaires per capita than any other Mississippi town.

Yet a lively social scene prevails on Main Street. Several restaurants occupy the short row of storefronts facing lovely Victorian mansions across the tracks. They're the kind of casually sophisticated dining spots you might expect to find in a college town rather than an economically bereft farm burg of two square miles and thirteen hundred souls.

About thirty miles south of Memphis along I-55 and within an hour's drive of destination towns like Tunica, Clarksdale, and Oxford, Como invites more traffic than you might think. It has its old-money residents, but Como has lately attracted transplanted Memphians and commuters drawn to the small-town charm. It boasts an opera guild, and some of the old plantations are gathering places for fox hunts. Nor does it hurt that it's in a wet county, bordered by several dry ones.

Como has another distinction: It is the epicenter of Mississippi Hill Country blues, a vanishing style of American music born in its outlying rural areas. Heavy on primitive African rhythms, with hints of hillbilly,

it has captivated such music icons as Bonnie Raitt, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones. Unlike the blues musicians from deep in the Delta who migrated north, these country blues musicians earned a cult following and continued to live on their farms, where they fashioned their instruments with found materials.

Othar ("Otha") Turner led a band of drummers with a fife he carved from river cane and christened with a beer before playing. Napoleon Strickland plucked a diddley bow, a single wire stretched between two screws on a wooden board. The blind musician Sid Hemphill played the quills (cane pipes) and a jaw harp, in addition to the banjo and fiddle. His granddaughter, Jessie Mae Hemphill, banged the snare and bass drums in his fife-and-drum band before mastering the electric guitar, which would send her on gigs all over the world.

Bonnie Raitt traveled to Como when she was eighteen to study with Mississippi Fred McDowell, a farmer whose mastery of the bottleneck slide guitar was such that folk music archivist Alan Lomax brought him into the Atlantic Records studio. The Rolling Stones later invited him to tour in

Europe and bought him a silver lamé suit, which he wore home to Como. He was buried in the suit after he died of cancer at age sixty-eight. Carved on the back of his small tombstone in a local cemetery is a verse of McDowell's song "You Got to Move," which was covered by the Stones.

In downtown Como, there are two Mississippi Blues Trail markers—one commemorating McDowell, the other Othar Turner, leader of the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band. Turner was recognized not only for preserving music traditions unique to the region but also for inaugurating a quirky food custom as well. For decades at his farm in Gravel Springs he hosted a Labor Day dance and picnic whose centerpiece was a goat he field-dressed and barbecued himself. That event, carried on in his name each year by relatives and friends, inspired the title of Turner's first album, *Everybody Hollerin' Goat*, which he cut in his nineties.

Turner played his music until his death in 2002 at age ninety-four. His daughter, Bernice Turner Pratcher, who had been battling breast cancer, died the same day. In a funeral procession through the streets of Como, Turner's then thirteen-year-old granddaughter Sharday Thomas led a fife-and-drum ensemble, playing one of her mentor's signature handmade bamboo instruments the way he'd taught her. She continues to perform at festivals and concerts around the area.

A good time to visit Como is the first weekend in December, when the town hosts its annual Christmas in Como celebration, showcasing its rich music heritage in a series of performances inside and outside the buildings along Main Street.

★ **Como Steakhouse.** 203 Main Street. 662-526-9529. thecomosteakhouse.com

In the late 1980s Paul Beavers, who'd designed the open charcoal pits at the Butcher Shop restaurants in Memphis, wanted to open another steak house where customers could watch a grillmeister tend sizzling slabs of meat right in the dining room. Market research led him to Como, whose main drag at the time had little more than a grocery store, a drugstore, and a post office. The town's central location seemed ideal—for Memphis commuters, Ole Miss football fans, and Blues Trail followers.

Former Memphians Rick and Kay King bought the Como Steakhouse with friend Gary May in the early 1990s. Ever since, the restaurant has prevailed as one of Mississippi's most popular steak houses. It's spacious, with a laid-back vibe. The exposed-brick walls are hung with local historical photographs, vintage neon, and framed posters.

From the balcony, with a predinner cocktail in hand, you can take in a wide-angle view of the grand Victorian houses along Sycamore Street directly behind the railroad tracks. But the real draw is what comes off those massive grills downstairs. Besides steaks, the chefs char kebabs, ribs, catfish, salmon, and rack of lamb, served up with giant loaded spuds and salads with homemade dressing. The Kings pride themselves on special appetizers like deep-fried olives and buttery grilled mushrooms. Their signature dessert is the Como Delight, an extravaganza of chocolate pudding, whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and walnuts piled atop a cookie base.

The Como Steak House has four dining rooms and an oyster bar upstairs that serves a less expensive menu of raw oysters, hamburgers, po-boys, and peel-and-eat crawfish in season, with beer by the bottle or bucket. There is a full bar downstairs as well.

★ **Windy City Grille.** 217 Main Street. 662-526-0331. windycitygrille.com

In recent years, much of the younger bar crowd has migrated a few doors down from the Como Steakhouse to the Windy City Grille, owned by partner Gary May's Chicago native wife, Anne May. That menu specializes in Chicago-style deep-dish and thin-crust pizza, calzones, and robust sandwiches served with "dirty" chips—paper-thin potato chips doused in spicy seasonings. A massive wide-screen television tuned to sports hangs over the bar, where an array of clever cocktails are served. On weekends there's sometimes live music.

LONGREEN FOX HUNT AND BLESSING OF THE HOUNDS BREAKFAST

★ **ON A CHILLY NOVEMBER MORNING,** members of the Longreen Foxhounds foxhunting club gather on the lawn of a plantation home near Como for the annual Blessing of the Hounds. Huntsmen in formal riding attire fortify themselves with slices of banana bread and "stirrup cups" of warm cider spiked with rum. A Presbyterian minister offers a blessing. Then nine pairs of hounds, followed by the huntsmen and spectators in carriages, trot down the drive under a canopy of fall foliage in pursuit of the quarry—which in these parts is coyote rather than fox.

For several hours, the huntsmen and carriages follow the roar of the pack through the native grassland and pine and hardwood forests. Sounds of hunting horns, galloping horses, shouts of "Tally-Ho!" and the bugle-like cries of the hounds fill the air. The hunt typically ends when the coyote disappears into a den of some kind or the hounds lose the scent.

By early afternoon, the hounds are kenneled as riders dismount and gather for the hunt breakfast—potluck dishes prepared in advance by the members. The long dining room table is crammed with ham, smoked turkey, breakfast casseroles, biscuits, cheese grits, salads, and a separate buffet table holding plenty of desserts that are a rich reward for the morning's exertions.

Most of the Longreen contingent are from the Memphis area, where foxhunting has been popular among the horsey set for years; Bart Mueller introduced the sport to west Tennessee when he started the Longreen Foxhounds club in the Memphis suburb of Germantown. His hounds were Penn-Marydels, bluebloods whose ancestors hunted with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. As shopping centers and subdivisions encroached, the group started searching further afield for territory. They found the open space they were looking for around Birdlands plantation, a historic farm managed by Memphis-area residents Harriet and Jake McFadden as a refuge for quail, deer, and coyote. They have also hosted hunts at a plantation in Glendora, on the Delta side of Tallahatchie County. For the Longreen Hounds hunters, the thrill is in the chase—and the festivities that follow.

Longreen Fox Hunt Hot Curried Fruit

This 1960s throwback is still perfectly fashionable on many a brunch or holiday buffet table in the Deep South.

MAKES 8 SERVINGS

1 (15.25-ounce) can peach halves
1 (15.25-ounce) can pear halves
1 (15.25-ounce) can apricot halves
1 (15-ounce) can pineapple chunks
2 (6-ounce) jars maraschino cherries
2 tablespoons cornstarch
¼ pound (1 stick) butter
½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1 teaspoon curry powder

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Drain the fruit well, reserving the juices. Mix the juices together in a small bowl and then measure out 2 cups. Arrange the fruit in 2-quart ovenproof casserole.

In a small bowl, dissolve the cornstarch in ¼ cup of the reserved juice. In a medium saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Stir in the cornstarch mixture, the remaining 1¾ cups juice, the brown sugar, and curry powder. Cook, stirring continuously, until the sauce is glossy and bubbly. Spoon the sauce over the fruit. Bake for 45–50 minutes. Serve hot, room temperature, or cold.

5 TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY

Wild and Mysterious

TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY stretches from the fecund flatlands in the west to the undulating eastern hills. In the old days, it could take weeks to traverse the swamps and woods to get from one town to the next, thus two county seats: Charleston in the east, Sumner in the west. The cultural divide is also evident.

"There's a feeling that the west side is more the landed gentry and that the east side is more the loggers, the farmers, and the hillbillies," said Glenna Callender, the executive director of the Charleston Arts and Revitalization Effort, Inc. (CARE), which promotes arts education and historic preservation programs in her community. "The people on each side tend to socialize mostly with each other. But it's not unfriendly. We all dated boys from the west side."

Legend says W. C. Handy discovered the blues in 1903 upon hearing a farmhand singing mournfully at the depot in the little town of Tutwiler. Handy wrote a version of the song, "Yellow Dog Blues," and went on to become Father of the Blues. Its water tower is inscribed with the slogan "Where the Blues Was Born," though several other Delta towns also make this claim.

Most of the world, however, identifies Tallahatchie County with something else: one of the most infamous racial murders in American history.

In August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago, was kidnapped from his uncle's home in Money, Mississippi, after allegedly whistling at a white woman. Several days later, the teen's battered body, tied with barbed wire to a cotton gin fan, was fished out of the Tallahatchie River on the Tallahatchie County side. The woman's husband and his half-brother were charged but acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury that deliberated less than an hour. Within months, the two men had confessed to the crime in *Look* magazine, intensifying the outrage and bringing more negative publicity to the Delta.

Tallahatchie County has in recent years been trying to come to terms with the searing episode. Residents formed a biracial commission for the purpose of restoring the Sumner County Courthouse to its 1955 state and turning it into a museum dedicated to Emmett Till. (A small museum honoring Till's memory already exists in an old cotton gin at the end of a dirt road in nearby Glendora.) In 2007, the commission unveiled the first in a series of historical markers related to Till's murder, and members read aloud a resolution expressing regret for a "terrible miscarriage of justice." Disagreements persist in the county as to how best to honor, rather than exploit, Till's legacy, but plans for the new museum are going forward, and the courthouse itself has been placed on the National Historic Register.

Sumner, a community of less than 450 bordered by a bayou and some old railroad tracks, is in the flat, western part of the county. Other than the courthouse, there's not much left of the tiny business strip but a couple of law offices, a bank, and a pharmacy. There is no restaurant, but many residents belong to the Bayou Bend Country Club, where the Sunday night buffet offers fresh seafood, frogs' legs, and sometimes quail.

Charleston is the older and larger of the two county seats, with a population of about two thousand. It was once renowned for timber, with one of the largest lumber mills in the world, a hotel, shops and restaurants, and a golf course, where William Faulkner supposedly practiced his swing.

Charlestonians are proud of the stately old bank they've restored and turned into a community arts center. A banner with portraits of three of

the county's famous native sons—jazzman Mose Allison, actor Morgan Freeman, and blues great Sonny Boy Williamson—festoons the entrance. Residents also like to direct visitors to another landmark, a tiny tin-roofed house with a large ceramic pig in front. The house is a monument to Scissors the pig. Raised on Pine Crest farm east of the city, Scissors was named overall Champion Hog at the Omaha Livestock Show in 1917 and 1918 and at one point was said to have weighed 1,800 pounds.

Freeman, who owns a ranch outside Charleston, spotlighted his hometown in the documentary *Prom Night in Mississippi*, about preparations for the local high school's first integrated prom in 2008. His former wife, Myrna Colley-Lee, is active in fund-raising efforts in Charleston, especially those involving the arts.

At the **Tutwiler Community Education Center**, a group of African American women gather regularly to quilt. Their works have been featured at the Smithsonian Institution and in museums around the country. If you call ahead, you may be able to see some of their works on display. If not, you can order items from www.tutwilerquilters.org. In addition to quilts, they sell place mats, wall hangings, pot holders, bags, and photo greeting cards.

As in the rest of the Delta, food in Tallahatchie County is a powerful, elemental force, both in private homes and in public spaces that manage to stay afloat on little more than creativity, determination, and unflagging community spirit. Most of the independent options are what some of the citizens affectionately dub "gas station food"—with a few notable exceptions.

In downtown Charleston, **The China Cabinet Florist and Gift Shop** (311 West Main Street, 662-647-5578) sells flowers and trinkets, but it's also a small café that attracts a bustling lunch crowd for the homemade chicken salad and soups and shrimp po-boys.

Nearby, a long-defunct John Deere dealership has morphed into the **Three Way Restaurant** (5620 Mississippi Highway 32, 662-647-0390), the county's only full-service restaurant. Owners Kay and James Paul Williams serve the usual Delta standbys, but seafood—especially gumbo—is their specialty; James Paul makes regular trips to the Gulf Coast to bring back whatever looks good and is seasonally priced. The Williamses added a seafood shop next door so their landlocked neighbors could have a local source for fresh fish.

The Three Way is named for the three-way stop sign next to it, at the intersection of Highways 32 and 35. To the west is tabletop-flat farmland, to the east a great wall of kudzu. Nowhere is it more evident where the Delta ends and the hill country begins.

★ **Webb's Diner (aka Vera's).** 107 East Main Street. Webb. 662-375-8463.

Aficionados of the plate lunch—meat and three vegetables, biscuit or cornbread, sweet tea—rave about this restaurant, which is officially called Webb's Diner but is known to the locals as Vera's.

Hard by the railroad tracks in the farm community of Webb—its moribund business district ghostly quiet—is this white clapboard and cinderblock shotgun house with a weathered red aluminum awning. It's easy to miss, even if you have the exact address; the sign is gone from the rusty pole out front, but propped against the building is a hand-lettered placard with the words "Webb Diner."

The dark-paneled room is as simple and unassuming as the exterior, with an uneven black-and-white checkerboard floor and faded tablecloths in a matching pattern. The high-backed wooden booths are painted red, with a tarnished brass hook affixed to each for hanging coats and hats. Intoxicating food smells fill the space.

A convivial, mixed-race lunch crowd stands in line as several women behind the counter dish up catfish straight from the sizzling oil, tender baked chicken, spaghetti with meat sauce, butter beans, pole beans, potato salad, candied yams, and cornbread.

A portrait of a young woman wearing bright red lipstick and a 1970s-style Afro hangs on the wall. That's proprietor Vera Williams, who

on the day I visited was wearing a royal-blue apron over a cheery print blouse, black-frame glasses studded with rhinestones, and a hair net over her gray locks. In between dishing up plates, she made the rounds, greeting business people, blue-collar workers, and farmers.

One of fifteen children, Williams was born and raised in the area and worked as a seamstress in the Gator Mills garment factory while raising nine children. Widowed in 1977, she bought the building after the factory closed. She has operated the restaurant since 1988. Family members help.

"I wanted something of my own," she said. "It's just my own recipes. It's all made from scratch. I chop the slaw by hand. We mix it up and make our own sauce." Like everything on the menu, the homemade desserts are pure and honest and taste of the country: pound cakes, banana pudding, buttermilk pie, and egg custard pie. Forget what the sign outside says. Welcome to Vera's.

PECANS AND NUTTY TREATS

★ **Delta Pecan Orchard.** 1-800-281-2582. www.deltapecan.com

Rural Tallahatchie County might seem an odd place for two city folks to retire or start a business, but Mike and Suzanne Powers did both. After years of traveling all over the country with Mike's job, they moved from Cincinnati to settle down on the outskirts of Tutwiler. The couple bought a two-hundred-acre pecan grove and, more than a decade on, have 2,500 flourishing trees and about sixteen acres of newer trees in various stages of maturity. They opened a commercial kitchen in 2001, after perfecting various recipes, and now have a thriving wholesale and online mail-order business, as well as a shelling plant with a handful of employees. Specialties include pralines, pie, fudge, chocolate bark, and "Delta Dollars" (caramel-pecan clusters coated with dark, white, or milk chocolate). "Cotton Bolls"—pieces of chocolate pecan fudge dipped in white chocolate and rolled in more nuts—are sold at the Memphis Farmers Market. The Powerses also bottle pecan oil—touted for its mild flavor, high smoke point (470 degrees), and heart-healthy qualities (lower in saturated fat than olive oil).

Pecan Dream Bars

Suzanne Powers experiments with new ways to make use of each year's crop, using the couple's own recipes and those they've collected from friends, family, and customers. This one, on their website, is a fantastic variation on traditional pecan pie.

MAKES 2 DOZEN

1½ cups all-purpose flour
1¾ cups firmly packed brown sugar, divided
¼ pound (1 stick) butter
4 large eggs
½ cup light corn syrup
⅓ cup butter, melted
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1½ cups chopped pecans
1 cup finely chopped almond brickle or toffee chips

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly grease a 13-by-9-by-2-inch baking pan.

In a small bowl, stir together the flour and ¾ cup of the brown sugar. Cut in the butter with a pastry blender until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Press the mixture evenly over the bottom of the prepared pan. Bake for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, stir together the eggs, the remaining 1 cup of brown sugar, the corn syrup, and melted butter until smooth. Stir in the vanilla, pecans, and brickle. Pour over the hot baked crust. Bake until the topping is set, about 30 minutes. Cool to room temperature before cutting into bars.

Caldo Gallego (Betty's Christmas Night Turnip Greens Soup)

Descendants of some of Sumner's earliest settlers still occupy a few of the former plantation homes on the long, crooked stream known as Cassidy Bayou, named for one of the early timbermen. They are a tight-knit bunch and entertain regularly among themselves, especially around the holidays. For as long as most people can remember, they have celebrated both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at neighbors' homes, with lavish, traditional spreads of favorite dishes.

For many years, turnip greens soup was the specialty of Betty Pearson, who based her recipe on the Spanish classic Caldo Gallego, which she and husband Bill had enjoyed in Madrid. Versions of it now turn up all over the Delta—including as an occasional special at Turnrow Books café in Greenwood, where one of the employees just happens to be from Sumner.

Collards or kale may be substituted for the turnip greens.

MAKES 10 TO 12 SERVINGS

1½ cups dried white navy beans
8 ounces Serrano, country, or other dry-cured or smoked ham, diced
2 smoked ham hocks
1 large onion, chopped
2 quarts chicken broth, plus more as needed
1 pound turnip greens, stems removed, leaves washed and coarsely chopped
2 small hot chiles, such as serrano, pricked several times with a fork
6 ounces chorizo or andouille sausage, thinly sliced and sautéed lightly to remove fat
3 to 5 small red new potatoes, peeled and diced (about 2 cups)
Salt, ground black pepper, and cayenne pepper, to taste
French bread, cornbread, or ham biscuits, for serving

Pick over the beans, discarding any bad ones. Rinse the beans, pour them into a large bowl, cover with cold water to a depth of at least 2 inches, and let soak overnight. Drain the beans and pour them into a large pot. Add the ham, ham hocks, onion, and chicken broth and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer until the beans are almost tender, about 1 hour, adding more chicken broth if needed to keep the beans submerged. Add the turnip greens and chiles and simmer for another 45 minutes. Add the sausage and potatoes and cook until the potatoes are tender, adding broth as needed to keep everything well covered.

Remove the ham hocks and chiles with a slotted spoon. Discard the bones, fat, and skin of the hocks; cut any lean meat into small bits and return it to the soup. Season the soup with salt, pepper, and cayenne.

Remove the pot from stove and let the soup cool to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Skim the congealed fat off of the surface of the soup. Bring the soup slowly to a boil and taste for seasoning. If it's too thick, thin with water. Serve with good French bread or cornbread. (On Christmas night the Sumner crowd typically serves it with ham biscuits.)

MOSE ALLISON: POETIC JAZZMAN, ECLECTIC COOK

★ **RENOWNED JAZZMAN MOSE ALLISON** left the tiny farm community of Tippo for the army after high school more than sixty years ago and has spent most of his life in New York or traveling ever since. He has been described as "a national treasure" and "the William Faulkner of Jazz" and been credited with influencing rock legends including the Who, Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, and many more.

But he maintains close ties to Tallahatchie County. In 2010, he returned to the Delta to visit family in Charleston and perform at Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, after picking up an honorary doctorate of letters from Louisiana State University. In presenting the honor, his alma mater described him as "a poetic jazzman whose philosophical bent, silky voice, and sometimes understated piano accompaniment capture the essence of the American aesthetic of 'cool.'"

When he wasn't on the road, he was the primary cook for his schoolteacher wife, Audre, and their four children. As with his music, he drew inspiration from cuisines all over. But he never lost his affinity for the foods of his childhood and, according to Audre, "Mose still makes the best cornbread ever . . . in an iron skillet, using his mother's simple recipe."

For the *Charleston C.A.R.E.S.* community cookbook, Mose Allison contributed a favorite family recipe that sounds exotic but is actually based on the vegetables of his Delta youth.

Mose's Moroccan Stew

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 cups coarsely chopped onions
3 garlic cloves, minced or pressed
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ to 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
½ teaspoon ground paprika
1 cup sliced carrots
4 cups cubed sweet potatoes
3 cups cubed eggplant
1 cup thin bell pepper strips
4 cups sliced zucchini or summer squash
3 cups chopped fresh tomatoes
1½ cups freshly cooked or canned garbanzo beans,
drained with liquid reserved
Pinch of saffron
¾ cup dried cherries or cranberries, or ½ cup raisins
½ cup tomato juice, reserved bean liquid, wine, or chicken stock,
plus more as needed
¼ cup chopped fresh parsley

In a stew pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat and sauté the onions, stirring, until they begin to wilt, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the garlic, cumin, turmeric, cinnamon, cayenne, and paprika, stirring continuously. In this order so that the starchier vegetables can cook the longest, add the carrots, sweet potatoes, eggplant, bell pepper, squash, and tomatoes. Stirring, let each addition cook until it begins to soften before adding the next vegetable.

Stir in the garbanzo beans, saffron, dried cherries, and tomato juice or other liquid. If the stew is dry, add more liquid. Cover and simmer on low heat until the vegetables are tender, about 30 minutes. Add the chopped parsley just before serving warm.

6 CLEVELAND AND ENVIRONS

Home of the Fighting Okra

THE BLUES HIGHWAY, aka Highway 61, stretching from Memphis to Vicksburg, becomes the main thoroughfare of Cleveland, a lively little town midway between the two cities that is home to Delta State University. Founded as a teachers' college in 1924, this campus of four thousand boasts a music institute, performing arts center, the Mississippi Blues Hall of Fame, and championship sports teams. But the school is perhaps best known for its mascot, the Fighting Okra.

One story of how this slimy vegetable became the iconic image of the school—and the city—goes something like this: In the late 1980s, some DSU ball players had a late-night gripe session about the meekness of the official team name, the Fighting Statesmen. The athletes wanted something tough, southern, ugly, and green (to match the jerseys). A baseball player mentioned an especially stubborn okra plant growing near first base on the baseball diamond. No matter how often it was mowed, the plant always came back tougher than ever.

And so it was decided. At basketball games, the baseball players chanted "Okra! Okra! Okra!" Classmates chimed in, and the rest is history. Now students sport T-shirts and caps emblazoned with a menacing pod wearing

boxing gloves. A human costumed version—Mr. Okra—leads fans in cheers during games. The basketball stadium is nicknamed the Okradome.

Needless to say, you don't have to look far to order okra on a menu around here. Dining options are plentiful around Cleveland, and menus tend to cover not only the longstanding local favorites but also dishes that appeal to a diverse academic and business crowd.

For several decades, restaurant goers came to Cleveland from miles around to dine at KC's, run by a local Chinese family. The spot was hailed in the national media for its fine global cuisine and impressive wine list. Though the sagging economy forced it to shutter its doors in 2010 (chef Wally Joe now helms Acre in Memphis, see pages 56–59), a handful of restaurants in and around Cleveland continue to showcase their own cosmopolitan specials featuring ingredients like elk and lobster. Not coincidentally, some of their chefs trained in KC's kitchen.

Meanwhile, soul food restaurants, barbecue joints, hot tamale vendors, catfish houses, and farmers markets keep on doing what they do best. Visitors are often led to them by Luther Brown, a Delta State professor of regional history and founding director of the university's Delta Center for Culture and Learning. He arranges Delta tours for outside groups by request. Whatever the particular focus of the class or tour group—blues, civil rights, the Mississippi River—Brown and his staff manage to weave tamales, Kool-Aid pickles, and barbecue into the lesson plans. Inevitably, these tours include detours beyond Cleveland's city limits.

Cleveland is one of two county seats in Bolivar County. The other is the port town of Rosedale, where a levee separates it from the Mississippi and the Arkansas border. Its main draws are the Great River Road State Park and what may be the most legendary hot tamale vendor in all the Delta, plus a popular funky-casual restaurant with occasional live music. A few miles south of Cleveland, Merigold and

Mound Bayou are famed for pottery and crawfish, and nearby is Po' Monkey's, one of the last authentic juke joints and now a popular late-night spot for blues aficionados and frat boys alike.

★ **Airport Grocery.** 3608 Highway 61 North. 662-843-4817. www.airportgrocery.net

The Airport Grocery is a rambling structure built of unpainted wood from a nineteenth-century house and decorated with antiques and old signage inside and out. Its roots go back to the Depression.

That's when Italian immigrant Joseph Rocconi opened a small grocery store that he later moved closer to the Cleveland airport. The place changed ownership several times over the years, and in 1992, Jonathan Vance, a former plumber from Benoit, took over. He added live music—mostly blues, naturally—and moved to a larger location. But his biggest contribution is represented in the first item listed under "Appetizers": homemade hot tamales "rolled in real corn shucks." Vance's grandfather was a good friend of the late Joe Pope of the White Front Café in Rosedale, widely viewed as the high priest of tamale making. Pope shared the recipe and methods with the Vance family.

The atmosphere at this latest incarnation of Airport Grocery conjures a Deltafied version of T.G.I. Fridays. Hundreds of T-shirts with sports- and music-themed logos hang from the rafters. Tin buckets serve as light fixtures. Sprightly coeds wait tables and college boys shoot pool and throw darts.

The menu is heavy on creative burgers and sandwiches. But a handful of dishes assure you that this place is no chain. Besides the tamales, the pulled-pork barbecue is smoky and tender, and the barbecue sauce in squeeze bottles on the tables is house-made. The desserts—Italian cream cake, caramel cake, banana pudding—look like something your grandmother might have made.

If you're into blues, be sure to check out the schedule of performers. Fingers Taylor, Blind Mississippi Morris, Willie Foster, and Sam Carr are just a few of the musicians who have stirred the crowds from the Airport Grocery's stage.

★ **Crawdad's of Merigold.** 104 S. Park Street. 662-748-2441. www.crawdads1.com

Amid the boarded-up businesses in tiny Merigold is Crawdad's, a hulking modern cypress lodge that looks more like a high-end hunting club than a restaurant. Stroll past the chocolate labs lolling on its massive stone porch and you enter a taxidermy museum of sorts, where you can dine very well on crawfish in season and all manner of red meat and seafood dishes.

A chandelier made of antlers hangs from the vaulted ceiling in the foyer, where coiled rattlesnakes appear ready to spring from the walls. Short stools made of elephant feet surround a corner table. Dozens of deer heads stare from hallways leading from one dining room to another, where cougars and bobcats are frozen in midroar.

"A lot of people around here go hunting in Africa, and their wives don't want that stuff hanging on the walls at home. So they can bring them here and show them off to their friends while they eat," explains owner Andrew Westerfield, an attorney who has served as Merigold's mayor for decades as well as president of the Merigold Hunt Club.

From its humble beginnings in 1984 in a tiny shotgun house on Highway 61 ("We had one table that sat six people," Westerfield says), Crawdad's has grown into one of the region's most popular restaurants. Locals started coming for the crimson crustaceans—steamed with Cajun spices and chunks of corn, potatoes, and sausages—then for other offerings as the menu expanded along with the dining space. Over the years, Crawdad's has changed location and undergone several renovations; now it's big enough to seat three hundred—half the population of Merigold.

Classically trained chefs have manned the kitchen in recent years, and the menu has grown increasingly ambitious. The crawfish cakes (which can be made with frozen crawfish tails) are a year-round favorite. Chef David Wright, a Cleveland native and graduate of Le Cordon Bleu in Atlanta, shared the recipe.

Crawdad's Crawfish Cakes

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter
⅓ cup chopped green onions
¼ cup finely chopped red bell pepper
1 teaspoon Cajun seasoning blend
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 to 3 tablespoons white wine
1 pound cooked crawfish tails, drained thoroughly and coarsely chopped
⅓ cup sour cream
2 tablespoons yellow mustard
¾ cup plain or Italian-style dry bread crumbs
2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more as needed
Crawdad's Rémoulade Sauce, for serving (recipe follows)

In a small skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the green onions and bell pepper and sauté until soft, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the Cajun seasoning and cayenne and cook, stirring, 1 minute longer. Add the wine and cook a few minutes until most of it evaporates. Transfer the mixture into a medium bowl.

Add the crawfish tails, sour cream, mustard, and bread crumbs. Stir until well-mixed. Gently shape the mixture into 4 to 6 cakes. Cover and chill until firm, at least 20 minutes.

In a large nonstick skillet, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Cook the cakes until both sides are golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Serve warm with Crawdad's Rémoulade Sauce.

Crawdad's Rémoulade Sauce

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

½ cup mayonnaise
⅓ cup yellow mustard
¼ cup ketchup
2 heaping tablespoons chopped green onions
1 tablespoon prepared horseradish
1 tablespoon minced garlic
Juice of ½ lemon
½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
¼ teaspoon sweet paprika
Pinch of cayenne pepper
Dash of Louisiana hot sauce
Salt, to taste

In a small bowl, mix the mayonnaise, mustard, ketchup, onions, horseradish, garlic, lemon, Worcestershire sauce, paprika, cayenne, and hot sauce. Season with salt. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

LAST OF THE JUKE JOINTS: PO' MONKEY'S, MERIGOLD

☆ **PO' MONKEY'S** is an essential stop on every Delta tour. It's one of the last rural juke joints, immortalized by photographer Annie Leibovitz and a slew of journalists and blues documentarians.

I'd been told Thursday night was the best time for a curious outsider to visit, because that's when longtime proprietor Willie Seaberry—aka Po' Monkey—puts on a floor show. I'd seen photographs of him strutting around in flamboyant suits, which he was said to change many times in the course of an evening.

On this pitch-black evening, I crossed Highway 61 and turned onto a gravel road that snaked along a bayou. Eventually I spotted a windowless, patched-up shack lit with Christmas lights—a jagged giant piece of folk art jutting out of the bleak landscape.

There were creaky steps to negotiate, a $5 cover charge to pay. Then I entered a dark, low-ceilinged room filled with smoke and noise and plastered wall-to-wall with beer posters and pinup girls. Toy monkeys dangled from the ceiling amid more Christmas lights and a disco ball. Classic R&B played on the jukebox.

I felt like I'd crashed someone's living room. In the middle of the space stood a plywood table strewn with Bud Lights, a half-empty bottle of Rémy Martin, and open bags of barbecue-flavored Doritos. A dozen men and a couple of women sat on a ratty sofa and metal chairs, yukking it up. A man a generation older than this middle-aged group held court, a cigar stub poking from the side of his mouth.

This was the famous Po' Monkey who, to my disappointment, was wearing a beige work uniform with a matching cap instead of one of his snazzy costumes. He looked to be in his late sixties and maintained a perpetual smile under a pencil-thin moustache.

"Come on in and have a seat—what can I get you to drink?" he called when he noticed me standing around, looking a bit at a loss. I passed him a few dollars and he retrieved a bottle of Bud from a cooler in the tiny kitchen.

At Seaberry's invitation, I squeezed onto the sofa with the other guests. Most were regulars, but one was a film producer, and another with a camera around his neck was a tourist from out of state. Someone finally asked the question:

"Hey, Monkey, you putting on a show tonight?"

"I'm thinkin' about it" was the coy response.

Moments later he was distracted by a long-legged brunette with unnaturally full lips and extra-short shorts who cozied up beside him. She dragged him out of his chair for a dance, pulling him so close that their legs became entangled and they fell to the floor. They rolled around while their audience whooped and hollered.

"To you and the Po' Monkey—may he never fall down!" one of the revelers shouted, holding up his beer bottle.

I stuck around for as long as my eyes could take the cigarette smoke before calling it a night. This wasn't exactly the floor show I'd hoped for.

Maybe next time I'll get to see Monkey in his bright red suit with the matching derby.

★ Delta Fast Food. 701 South Davis Avenue. 662-846-8800.

Delta Fast Food occupies a spot on Cleveland's main drag in a little white building with peeling paint and a drive-through carport. In previous incarnations, it was a taxi stand and an ice house. Out front, a sign touts it as a "convenient store."

It is convenient indeed if you're hungry for tamales. "We make about sixty dozen at a time, three days a week," said Gentle Lee Rainey, who has co-owned Delta Fast Food with his partner, Otis Foster, since 1995. "It takes about a day and a half. But we don't be looking at the time."

The tamales may arrive quickly, but time seems to move slowly on both sides of the counter. Behind a partition, a couple of men cue up at the single pool table while old-school R&B drifts out of a portable radio. Big jars of candy, gum, and pickled eggs stand on the counter. The shelves are filled with chewing tobacco pouches, cigarettes, dishwashing detergent, motor oil, toilet paper, and headache medicines.

Rainey has been making tamales for more than forty years—a skill he says he learned from his grandfather while growing up on Dockery Plantation in nearby Ruleville, where blues greats like Howlin' Wolf and Charley Patton first began making music.

Rainey uses "real shucks" for wrapping and typically fills the corn-meal cylinders with beef, although he's used turkey and chicken as well. According to the plastic Coca-Cola sign behind the counter, you can also order hamburgers and hot dogs, as well as pigs' feet, fried gizzards, and turkey legs. And Rainey also makes that other Delta soul-food delicacy: Kool-Aid pickles.

"I used to see kids dip whole pickles in a Kool-Aid package. That was the thing. Fruit punch. Strawberry. Cherry. Lemon-lime. So I took the pickles out of a jar and put Kool-Aid in the juice, and then mixed in a coffee-cup of sugar. Then I put the pickles back in the jar to soak. Now everybody's doing it. I should have patented those.

"I let mine soak three to five days. Some people poke holes in them to make the Kool-Aid soak in faster. Some people cut them in half and charge twice as much!"

★ Senator's Place. 1028 South Davis Avenue. 662-846-7434.

Willie Simmons serves the public, whether he's dishing out fried catfish at his restaurant or voting on bills in the Mississippi senate. When the legislature's not in session, the silver-haired, bespectacled lawmaker can

usually be found inside his restaurant with a bright blue apron draped around his neck, chatting with customers as he passes in and out of the kitchen.

Across from a funeral home on the north end of town, Senator's Place is a cavernous brick building with a simple sign proclaiming "Delicious Food for the Soul" underneath its name. The spotless, no-frills interior has an assembly-hall feel, with oilcloth-covered tables and a buffet line. Behind the cash register is a framed mirror embossed with the Seal of Mississippi and Simmons's image.

Daily offerings include fried chicken, cornbread, dinner rolls, and a dessert—banana pudding, perhaps, or a simple vanilla pound cake. Most everything else varies daily; some of the vegetables, like the sweet potatoes, are grown in nearby Mound Bayou, where Alcorn State University—Simmons's alma mater—has an Extension farm program.

Simmons opened his restaurant in 2003, ten years after he was first elected to represent Cleveland in the senate. Before entering politics, he taught school in Rosedale and worked in government jobs.

"My kids messed my ego up," he said. "They'd say, 'Dad, we want your pancakes.' So I'd get up every Saturday morning and fix them. I don't think I'm that good of a pancake cooker, but I pounded my chest with pride anyway."

He is, however, unabashedly proud of his pecan-smoked chicken, which he serves only on Wednesdays and Sundays, seasoning it twenty-four hours in advance with a secret blend. Catfish is his other specialty, served on Fridays. The hush puppies are also standouts. Flecked with corn kernels and bits of bell pepper along with onion, these crunchy brown orbs are remarkably lighter than the nuggets you find elsewhere.

The restaurant is open every day for lunch, and for dinner on Friday nights; on Thursday nights they host blues and R&B bands. Monday is Customer Appreciation Day, when two dollars is knocked off the usual eight-dollar buffet price.

★ The Warehouse. 229 North Sharpe Avenue. 662-846-7223.

The Warehouse is a stylishly refurbished former feed-and-seed store in the middle of Cleveland's business district that's as much community hub as restaurant. The sprawling space accommodates everything from charity balls to live radio broadcasts where local coaches discuss the weekend's games with fans. Co-owner Scott Speakes, who played football at Cleveland High and still hangs out with former Ole Miss fraternity brothers, says he cherishes being able to hold on to that small-town feel. He also gets a kick out of giving his friends and neighbors a taste of the big city.

For years Speakes worked as a commercial photographer in New York and other cities, where hobnobbing with chefs became a favorite pastime. He returned to Cleveland to join family in transforming the turn-of-the-century building into a gift store cum restaurant. Eventually the retail area was phased out and a more sophisticated contemporary dinner menu added.

But nostalgia still flavors many of the choices. Sandwiches are named for beloved high school and college coaches. Pork shoulder is braised in RC Cola barbecue sauce—a nod to the old bottling company across the street—and comes with corn pudding on the side. And chicken is brined in sweet tea and lemon before grilling—a sophisticated twist on a backyard favorite.

The Warehouse's Sweet Tea–Brined Chicken

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

3 lemons
3 quarts plus 1 cup water
9 regular orange pekoe tea bags
2 tablespoons dried tarragon
½ cup kosher salt
¾ cup packed light brown sugar
6 cups ice
4 to 6 pounds bone-in chicken pieces with skin

Use a vegetable peeler to remove the lemon zest in wide strips. Squeeze the lemons to yield ¼ cup of juice.

In a large stockpot, bring the water to a boil. Remove the pot from the heat and add the lemon zest, tea bags, and tarragon. Let steep for 20 minutes and then discard the tea bags.

Add the salt and sugar; stir to dissolve. Stir in the lemon juice. Let the brine cool to lukewarm and then add the ice. Submerge the chicken in the brine. Cover and refrigerate for 6 to 12 hours. (If the refrigerator won't accommodate the large pot, divide the chicken and iced brine among several large resealable bags and place them in a cooler along with enough ice or freezer packs to keep the chicken well chilled. Position the bags so that the chicken is submerged.)

Preheat a gas grill to medium-high or prepare a charcoal grill by arranging medium-hot coals around a drip pan. Remove the chicken from the brine and pat the pieces thoroughly dry with paper towels. Discard the brine. Arrange the chicken pieces, skin-side down, over direct heat for 5 to 10 minutes, until nicely seared on one side. Flip the chicken over and move to a cooler area of the grill, or reduce heat to medium-low. Cover and indirect grill the chicken until it is browned and cooked through, 30 to 40 minutes longer. An instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast pieces should register 170°F; the thighs and other dark-meat pieces should register 180°F.

Arrange the chicken on a serving platter and serve hot or at room temperature.

EXPLORING THE DELTA TAMALE TRAIL

☆ **RICH, COMPLEX, EARTHY, SPICY,** packed with history and tradition and creativity: the Mississippi tamale is the essence of the Delta. Just about everyone who grew up here, regardless of race or economic status, loves them and has a favorite vendor.

Unlike those found in Mexican and southwestern-style restaurants, which can be dry and fairly tasteless, these savory cigar-shaped packages are typically moist and filled with finely ground beef or pork and dripping in oily, spicy juices. It is a true artisanal product rarely seen outside the state but sold everywhere in the Delta—at drive-through windows, meat-and-three cafés, blues bars, and even pricey steak restaurants.

No one, not even the cooks who spend the bulk of their days crafting them by hand, knows exactly how the hot tamale came to be the Delta's most famous dish. One popular explanation is that African American sharecroppers got their first taste from Mexican migrant workers who came up through Texas and Arkansas to work the cotton harvest around the turn of the century. The corn husks would have kept those savory fillings warm and steamy in a lunch pail—an appealing contrast to the cold sweet potato or cornbread wedge to which the Delta natives were more accustomed.

Nowadays tamales are also served in savory pies, in casseroles (typically layered with black beans, cheese, and salsa), and even salads. Some batter and deep-fry them, unhusked, and serve them with ranch dressing as an appetizer. At fancy cocktail parties, hosts have been known to pass saltines topped with a tamale chunk and a dab of ketchup.

Each July, a food festival in Greenville includes a World Championship Hot Tamale Contest, in which vendors from around the region compete for cash prizes.

At the University of Mississippi, oral historian Amy Evans Streeter of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture spent years traveling Delta back roads to record oral histories from tamale makers for the Southern Foodways Alliance Web site. She says she dedicated the Mississippi Delta Hot Tamale Trail (www.tamaletrail.com) to the memory of the late Joe Pope of the White Front Café, whose death inspired her to try to save as many stories of the practitioners of the tamale-making craft as she could to keep the tradition alive.

Travelers hankering for an authentic Delta-style tamale can locate them on the SFA's Tamale Trail map; many are featured throughout this book. Most make them on the premises; others have them delivered by a local tamale maker (usually Hot Tamale Heaven in Greenville).

Memphis

Blues City Café (31)

Clarksdale

Abe's Bar B Q Drive-In (80)
Ground Zero Blues Club (96)
Hicks' World Famous Hot Tamales (83)

Cleveland

Airport Grocery (121)
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Indianola

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Greenwood

The Crystal Grill (215)
Giardina's (205)
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Yazoo City

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Vicksburg

Solly's Hot Tamales (257)
The Tamale Place (270)

Mississippi Delta Tamales

Making tamales from scratch takes patience and practice. But it can be fun, and rewarding, especially if you enlist a friend or two to help with the rolling. I used the recipe from the Tamale Trail website as a starting place, borrowed some tips from Martha Foose's *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*, and added a few of my own ideas for my first attempt. My guests and I loved them, even though my technique has a ways to go before I consider opening my own tamale stand. Be sure to save the cooking liquid and any leftover chili-like meat filling in bowls to serve on the side.

MAKES 3 TO 4 DOZEN

FILLING

4 to 5 pounds boneless meat (pork shoulder, chuck roast, beef brisket, or chicken)
⅓ cup vegetable oil
2 large onions, minced
4 to 5 large garlic cloves, minced
¼ cup chili powder
2 tablespoons paprika
1 tablespoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon salt
2 teaspoons black pepper
½ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper

HUSKS AND DOUGH

40 to 50 dried corn husks (about 16 ounces total)
4 cups yellow cornmeal or masa mix
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup lard or vegetable shortening
3 to 4 cups warm meat broth (from cooking the meat)

SIMMERING LIQUID

Remaining meat broth, plus enough water to cover tamales
2 tablespoons chili powder
1 tablespoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
Saltines, hot pepper sauce, and leftover chili for serving (optional)

Make the meat filling: Cut the meat into large chunks and place in a large, heavy pot. Cover with cold water. Bring to a boil over high heat. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until the meat is very tender, 2 to 2½ hours. Remove the meat and reserve the cooking liquid. When the meat is cool enough to handle, remove and discard any skin and large chunks of fat. Shred or dice the meat into small pieces. There should be about 7 to 8 cups of meat.

In a large, heavy pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic; sauté until tender. Stir in the chili powder, paprika, cumin, salt, black pepper, and cayenne. Add the meat; stir to coat with the oil and spices. Cook, stirring often, until the meat is warmed through, 7 to 10 minutes. For a smoother consistency, grind the meat with a meat grinder or pulse it in a food processor. Set aside.

Prepare the husks: While the meat is cooking, soak the husks in a large bowl or sink of very warm water, until they are softened and pliable, about 2 hours. Gently separate the husks into single leaves. (Husks that split or tear can be overlapped and used as one.)

Make the dough: In a large bowl, use a wooden spoon or your hands to blend together the cornmeal, baking powder, salt, and lard until well mixed. (Or use a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment.) Gradually stir in enough warm broth to make soft, spongy dough that is the consistency of thick mashed potatoes. The dough should be quite moist, but not wet. Cover the bowl with a damp cloth.

Assemble the tamales: Remove a corn husk from the water and pat it dry. Lay the husk on a work surface. Spread about ¼ cup of the dough in an even layer across the wide end of the husk to within 1 inch of the edges. Spoon 1 heaping tablespoon of the meat mixture in a line down the center of the dough. Roll the husk so that the dough surrounds the filling and forms a cylinder or package. Fold the bottom under to close the bottom and complete the package. Place folded side down in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Repeat with the remaining husks. Reserve any leftover filling to serve as chili on the side.

Simmer the tamales: Stand the tamales upright, closed side down, in a large pot with a tight-fitting lid. Place enough tamales in the pot so that they do not fall over or come unrolled. If needed, fill any empty space with a heatproof mug, bowl, or rolled-up leftover corn husks.

Stir the chili powder, cumin, and cayenne into the reserved meat cooking liquid and carefully pour it into the side of the pot of tamales, taking care not to pour it directly into the tamales. The liquid should come just to the top of the tamales, so add water if needed. Bring to a boil over high heat. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until the dough is firm and pulls away from the husk easily and cleanly, about 1 hour.

Serve the tamales warm in their husks so that each diner can unwrap his or her own. Spoon a little leftover cooking liquid or chili on top. Shake on a few drops of hot sauce for extra heat and serve with saltines, if desired.

MORE LOCAL FLAVOR

★ **À la Carte Alley.** 111 South Court Street. 662-843-6510.

This longtime downtown lunch spot specializes in salads and sandwiches and includes a gift shop that sells regional cookbooks, Delta-made cheese straws, and other homegrown gourmet products.

★ **Country Platter.** 700 Ruby Street. 662-846-7051.

The electric-blue-painted building on the corner of Highway 61 and Ruby Street has been a favorite spot for plate lunches and strapping breakfasts since the days when civil rights leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Medgar Evers gathered here when the place was Lilley's Soul Food Café. Besides his cooking, proprietor Jimmy Williams is well-known for taking part in civic projects, like organizing youth volunteers to help serve turkey dinners to needy families on Thanksgiving Day. The solid menu is pretty much what you'll find in most soul food places, but it's also one of the few where catfish is a side order at breakfast—in place of bacon or sausage to go with scrambled eggs and grits.

★ **Crave Bistro.** 724 Davis Avenue. 662-843-5222.

This contemporary café and coffee house in a former gas station specializes in espresso, healthy breakfasts, seasonal homemade soups and sandwiches, and fresh-baked cupcakes in flavors like strawberry cream cheese and red velvet. Longtime caterer and restaurateur Charlotte Skelton is renowned around here for her classic chicken salad, which she dishes out along with more contemporary creations like a flatbread sandwich with hummus and roasted vegetables called the "Zen." Gourmet and artisanal items like imported olives and local grits line the shelves, and refrigerator and freezer cases are loaded with Italian deli meats and cheeses, casseroles, pimento cheese, and other items to go.

★ **Fat Baby's Catfish House.** 532 Highway 61 South. Shaw. 662-754-4762.

On Highway 61 just south of Cleveland, Fat Baby's is a favorite for reliably fresh catfish fried, grilled, blackened, simmered in gumbo, or baked in gooey, cheesy bread. Owner Joey Tatum has a catfish-seining business, but besides mudcats, his menu features fried frog legs and barbecue, and other Delta favorites served on picnic tables equipped with rolls of paper towels.

★ **Hey Joe's.** 118 East Sunflower Road, Suite C. 662-843-5425.

This high-energy spot is where you can shop for vinyl records and get a burger, hot dog, and frozen mixed drink in a Delta-centric atmosphere: beer-bottle chandeliers, windows trimmed in Christmas lights, collage-topped tables, an old shoe-shine stand.

A TRAIL OF POTTERY, WITH A LUNCH STOP

★ **McCartys Pottery.** 101 Saint Mary Street. Merigold. 662-748-2293. www.mccartyspottery.com

★ **The Gallery Restaurant.** 100 Sunflower. Merigold. 662-748-2754.

About seven miles south of Cleveland in tiny Merigold is an old mule barn almost entirely concealed by bamboo. There's no sign out front, or anything else to signal its presence. Yet pottery aficionados from near and far manage to find it.

Lee and Pup McCarty evolved their pottery style not long after William Faulkner said they were welcome to take the clay from a ravine on his Oxford property, Rowan Oak Plantation. Lee was teaching science at Ole Miss, and he and Pup began experimenting with Faulkner's gift. They moved to Lee's hometown of Merigold and in 1954 set up a studio in a barn a few blocks from the Illinois Central tracks in the then-bustling business district. Since then their work—trademarked by a squiggly black line representing the Mississippi River—has been shown in galleries and museums all over the world, including the Smithsonian Institution.

While McCarty pottery is available online and in regional gift shops, there's nothing like a visit to the source. Many people make an afternoon of it, strolling through the exotic gardens in back and stopping for lunch at the Gallery Restaurant in another mysterious vegetation-shrouded location nearby.

The main dining room is set with white wicker furniture, and in one corner is a piano, with the sheet music for "Unforgettable" open on the day I visited. (Lee is a musician in addition to being a physicist, botanist, and chemist; he occasionally delights visitors with an impromptu turn at the piano.) The three-course lunch, served on McCarty pottery, begins with homemade soup, a tiny corn muffin, and a triangle of bread topped with liver pâté and cucumber.

There are but two entrée choices—one cold and one hot—and two side dishes: rich and creamy Spinach Sunflower, and Merigold Tomatoes, a cheesy, bread-crumb-topped concoction. Chocolate or caramel cobbler crowned with freshly whipped cream follows.

Pup passed away in 2009, but Lee continues to spin his potter's wheel and oversee the menu at the restaurant, which is open for lunch only and private functions. Godsons Jamie and Stephen Smith, who grew up with the McCartys, help carry on the pottery tradition. Jamie is the potter; Stephen manages the businesses.

★ **Peter's Pottery.** 301 Fortune Avenue. Mound Bayou. 662-741-2283.
www.peters-pottery.net

Peter Woods and his three brothers—Joseph, Arthur, and Sandy—worked for McCartys Pottery for years before starting their own line in Mound Bayou, where they grew up. Since then they've built a national reputation of their own, and those who make the trek to McCartys typically continue on a few miles north to Peter's Pottery for more shopping.

Housed in a new metal building with attractive displays of their artwork and jazz music piped into the background, Peter's Pottery is one of the few thriving businesses in Mound Bayou, reputed to be the oldest all-black municipality in the country. Yet around the turn of the century, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed it "the jewel of the Delta."

In 1887, a former slave named Isaiah T. Montgomery led a group of other freed men in clearing, settling, and establishing a self-sustaining community for blacks, free of the violently oppressive racial codes prevalent throughout the rest of the South. These black pioneers farmed, ran their own government, and established banks, a hospital, newspapers, dozens of businesses, and even a zoo. It earned a reputation as a safe haven for blacks and, later, white civil rights workers.

Even after falling on hard times, its citizens continue to advocate the ideals of self-empowerment established by its founders. (A large sign along the

highway carries the motto: "The Helped Helping the Helpless.") Community gardens have been planted to feed its poorest citizens, and Alcorn State University has partnered with Mound Bayou farmers in research and education programs geared to expanding sweet potato production. In mid-September, the cooperative hosts the Mound Bayou Sweet Potato Jamboree / Fall Vegetable Field Day with demonstrations, field tours, and a sweet potato bake-off.

Meanwhile, the Woods brothers continue to transform that local clay into ducks, rabbits, candlesticks, bowls, and perhaps most strikingly, deviled-egg plates—edged by a dozen oval indentions for holding these buffet-table delicacies in place. Their works have found homes across the world, including in the White House, where President George W. Bush received a blue elephant characterized by the Woods brothers' signature Bayou Blue glaze.

Sorta Kinda Like Merigold Tomatoes

The McCarty family guards their recipes as carefully as the formulas for their signature glazes. But that has not stopped knock-offs of their best-loved dishes from appearing in local cookbooks from one end of the Delta to the other. Elizabeth Heiskell, a Rosedale native who became the lead culinary instructor at the Viking Cooking School, offers her modern adaptation in *Somebody Stole the Cornbread from My Dressing*, a charming little cookbook and memoir she coauthored with childhood friend Susanne Reed, who now lives in Pennsylvania. Some use Cheddar, stuffing mix, and Cajun seasonings; Heiskell brightens the flavors with freshly grated Parmesan, lemon zest, and fresh herbs.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

3 (28-ounce) cans whole, peeled tomatoes, drained
½ cup fresh chopped spinach
½ cup fresh chopped basil
1 tablespoon finely grated fresh lemon zest
1½ teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
6 ounces grated Parmesan cheese (1½ cups)
1 tablespoon brown sugar
4 cups fresh bread crumbs
2 tablespoons butter, melted

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter a 9-by-13-inch casserole dish.

In a large bowl, stir together the tomatoes, spinach, basil, lemon zest, salt, pepper, and cheese. Pour into the prepared dish. In a small bowl, mix together the brown sugar, bread crumbs, and melted butter and spread over the tomato mixture. Bake until nicely browned and bubbly, about 45 minutes. Serve hot.

THREE CURES FOR OKRAPHOBIA

★ **ON AN EPISODE** of his Food Network show *Good Eats*, Alton Brown interviewed Mr. Okra, Delta State's mascot, about ways to help okraphobes conquer their fear of this vegetable, whose mucilaginous properties tend to scare off noninitiates. Deltans can't seem to get enough of the stuff—especially in Cleveland, where there's even a sports bar called the Pickled Okra. These three dishes from the land of the Fighting Okra represent some of the best ways to eat it.

Blue Levee Fried Okra

In 2005, John Lewis and Andrea Drummond, an energetic young couple with big-city restaurant experience, transformed an old gas station in Rosedale into a rollicking little restaurant called the Blue Levee. They won accolades for the live music, beer selection, and diverse menu of well-executed dishes ranging from home-cooked traditional southern plate lunches and burgers to creative nightly specials.

Lewis perfected the technique for transforming okra into an addictive sharable appetizer by first dunking it in a seasoned batter then in a crunchy coating before frying. The Seasoned Flour Mix and Seasoned Cornmeal Mix are handy to have around for dredging all sorts of tasty fried things. As with fried dill pickles, most people like to dip fried okra in ranch dressing or Kumback Dressing (page 192).

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

Peanut oil or melted shortening for deep-frying
½ cup Seasoned Flour Mix (recipe follows)
½ cup water
4 cups fresh okra cut into ½- to 1-inch rounds
1 cup Seasoned Cornmeal Mix (recipe follows)

Heat the oil to 350°F in a deep-fat fryer.

In a large bowl, whisk together the Seasoned Flour Mix with the water. Pour the Seasoned Cornmeal Mix into another large bowl. The okra must be able to float freely in the hot oil, so working with a large handful at a time, add the okra to the flour batter and toss to coat thoroughly. Transfer the battered okra to the cornmeal mix and toss to coat. Add the okra and fry until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Repeat until all of the okra is fried. Serve hot.

SEASONED FLOUR MIX

2½ cups all-purpose flour
1½ tablespoons coarse kosher salt
1½ tablespoons coarse ground black pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
⅛ teaspoon garlic powder

In a large bowl, stir together all of the ingredients. Store in a covered container for up to 1 month.

SEASONED CORNMEAL MIX

2 cups cornmeal
¼ cup plain dry bread crumbs
1½ tablespoons coarse kosher salt
1½ tablespoons coarse ground black pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

In a large bowl, stir together all of the ingredients. Store in a covered container for up to 1 month.

Cleveland Farmers Market Pickled Okra

Baked goods and home preserves made from homegrown produce are mainstays at the local farmers market. One of the most popular items is the pickled okra brought by Nancy Sellers, a regular contributor. Deltans especially love them on relish trays or as a garnish for a Bloody Mary.

MAKES 3 PINTS

1 pound small fresh okra pods
1 tablespoon dill seed
1 tablespoon minced garlic
1 tablespoon crushed red pepper flakes
2 cups distilled vinegar
3 cups water
2 tablespoons kosher or pickling salt

Pack the okra into the jars, standing the pods upright and alternating the tips up and down. Add 1 teaspoon dill seed, 1 teaspoon minced garlic, and 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes to each jar. In a medium saucepan, stir together the vinegar, water, and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring until the salt dissolves. Pour the boiling vinegar mixture over the okra, leaving ½ inch of headroom.

Process the jars by following the manufacturer's directions. Let stand for 4 weeks before serving. Alternatively, store the unsealed jars in the refrigerator and use within 2 weeks. The flavor of unprocessed okra is milder, but still good.

Bolivar County Okra Pilaf

Rice grown in the Delta doesn't stay local for long. Once harvested, it will be processed (much of it at the Uncle Ben's plant in Greenville) and distributed all over the world. Even so, the grain figures heavily in Delta meals. That's especially evident each September, when some 1,200 people fill the Walter Sillers Coliseum for the Delta Rice Promotion Committee's annual rice luncheon to celebrate National Rice Month. For a couple of bucks, ticket holders can sample hundreds of rice dishes—from salad to main course to dessert—prepared by both home cooks and local chefs.

Similar recipes can be found in the spiral-bound cookbook *Between the Levees*, published in 1994 by the Delta Rice Promotions Committee and still sold during the event. Among the five hundred rice-based recipes is this winning combo of two favorite ingredients—rice and okra—contributed by Alice Herbison of Benoit.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

3 bacon slices, diced
2 teaspoons vegetable oil
2 cups thinly sliced okra rounds
1 cup chopped green bell pepper
1 cup chopped onion
1 cup uncooked long-grain rice
2 cups chicken broth
1 teaspoon salt, or to taste
1 (14.5-ounce) can chopped tomatoes, drained

Cook the bacon in a Dutch oven over medium heat until it renders some fat but is still soft. Add the oil and okra; sauté until lightly browned. Add the bell pepper and onion; cook, stirring continuously, until tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in the rice, chicken broth, and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring once. Cover, reduce the heat, and simmer until the rice absorbs the liquid, about 20 minutes. Gently stir in the tomatoes and cook a minute or two longer to heat through. Serve hot.

ITALIAN FESTIVAL OF MISSISSIPPI'S SPAGHETTI GRAVY COOKING CONTEST

The Catholic church at Indianola had a spaghetti dinner every year. One year, they decided to send an identical recipe for the gravy to the parishioners so they could cook it at home and then mix it all up at the church to save time. A disaster. Each one had added something different to make the sauce better than the recipe. Mixed together from multiple cooks, it was terrible. All Italian chefs think their gravy is better than anyone else's.

—STEVE FRATESI,
Leland catfish and prawn producer and spaghetti "gravy" connoisseur

★ **THE ITALIAN INFLUENCE** is profound all over the Delta. Restaurants of all types tout spaghetti with homemade red sauce—or "gravy," as the chefs' forebears were more apt to call it. Even in standard meat-and-three restaurants, white- or black-owned, it routinely appears on the buffet line, especially on Fridays, with catfish.

Many of the Italians who immigrated to the Delta opened grocery stores and restaurants, serving fried chicken and turnip greens as well as pasta. A number of those—Lusco's in Greenwood, Doe's in Greenville, Grisanti's in Memphis, Lillo's in Leland—are among the Delta's oldest and most beloved eateries, run by younger generations of those same families.

Some have added more contemporary dishes to the menu, but the mainstays are the slow-cooked Old World classics that arrived with their ancestors. These dishes star at the Italian Festival of Mississippi, a two-day bash at the Bolivar County Expo Building in Cleveland held each spring, featuring cooking demonstrations, a bocce tournament, grape stomping, and a spaghetti-eating contest.

Volunteers dish up lasagna, ravioli, and meatball subs, while teams compete in the Spaghetti Gravy Cooking Contest. On the entry application, officials define spaghetti gravy as "the juice exuded by cooking meat and Italian seasonings; also, a sauce made from it." The rules specify that all entrants must compete twice—first in a blind tasting of the gravy alone and again for a different panel of judges, with samples of pasta mixed with the sauce. In the second round, they must also explain how the gravy was cooked.

Most cooks don't measure ingredients and such, but Steve Fratesi, a catfish farmer and freshwater-prawn pioneer whose wife, Dolores, has been a judge in years past, took the time to measure out the ingredients for his version. The foundation is canned tomato sauce and tomato paste, which is cooked long and slow with onion, ground beef, and other seasonings. Humble as it sounds, the flavor is deceptively rich and robust and pairs perfectly with the meatballs prepared according to the recipe several Delta Catholic churches use for community spaghetti suppers.

Italian Meatballs for a Crowd

This is an excellent multipurpose meatball recipe with just the right balance of flavors. You can cut it in half for a smaller crowd, but since they freeze beautifully, I suggest making the whole batch as long as you're going to the effort.

Notes Sammye Short, the contributor: "My Mama never baked hers. She just dropped the meatballs right into the gravy and let them cook slow all day. Or at least it seemed like it. I just know our house smelled so good all day! Some fry them slightly then put them in the gravy. Everybody has their own way!"

These meatballs are wonderful on their own, tucked into a drippy meatball po-boy, or stirred into simmering pasta sauce.

MAKES 50 MEATBALLS, OR 10 TO 12 SERVINGS

5 pounds ground chuck
2 cups Italian-style dry bread crumbs
6 ounces finely grated Parmesan-Romano cheese blend (1½ cups)
1 cup finely chopped onion
½ cup finely chopped celery
2 to 3 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley or 1 tablespoon dried
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 teaspoons salt
1½ teaspoons ground black pepper
7 large eggs, beaten

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a large bowl, mix the meat, bread crumbs, cheese, onion, celery, parsley, garlic, salt, and pepper. Add the eggs and mix well.

Roll the meat mixture into balls (¼ cup makes a nice size meatball). Arrange the balls about 1 inch apart on lightly greased rimmed baking sheets. Bake until they are nicely browned and cooked through, about 30 minutes.

Steve Fratesi's Extra-Hearty Spaghetti with Meatballs

"Italian sauce is thick—it is thick with meat," explains Steve Fratesi, who grew up with spaghetti gravy and now makes it for family and friends. "That's why it is called gravy." Time is the key ingredient; a football game on TV and a bottle of wine, beer, or Old Charter nearby are essential. He also advises: "If you drink too much and have to take a nap, or if the football games last longer than you thought, then just add more water and let it cook. It just gets better the longer that it simmers."

It's great with meatballs, such as Italian Meatballs for a Crowd on page 141, but this one is so meaty and flavorful that it's hearty enough to stand on its own.

MAKES 12 TO 15 SERVINGS

½ cup olive oil
3 large onions, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 pounds ground beef
2 (15-ounce) cans tomato sauce
2 (6-ounce) cans tomato paste
4 cups water, plus more as needed
2 teaspoons salt, or to taste, divided
2 teaspoons ground black pepper, or to taste, divided
4 teaspoons dried oregano, divided
2 to 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley or 1 tablespoon dried, divided
1½ teaspoons dried basil, divided
½ teaspoon dried rosemary, divided
4 ounces grated Parmesan cheese (1 cup)
50 cooked meatballs, for serving (optional)
3 to 4 pounds hot, freshly cooked pasta, for serving

In a large, heavy, nonreactive pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onions and garlic and cook, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, until tender. ("Slightly burned is okay. It gives it more flavor.")

Add the ground meat and cook until browned, breaking up the meat with the spoon. Use a colander to drain the grease from the meat mixture and then return the drained meat to the pot. (If you don't have a colander, hold the meat in the pan with a spoon, tilt the pan, and pour the grease into the garbage can. Steve says to "Start over if you drop the pan or all the beef falls into the garbage. Remember that hot grease will put holes in garbage bags that will make a mess when you take it out. Use Pine-Sol on the floor if your wife sees this happen. If she doesn't, the dog will take care of it.")

Stir in the tomato sauce and paste. Fill each can half full of water and stir to loosen all of the sauce and paste and then pour into the pot. Stir in the 4 cups of water.

Add half of the salt, pepper, oregano, parsley, basil, and rosemary. Relax and let cook over medium heat for 1 to 2 hours, stirring occasionally so as not to burn. Add the remaining salt, pepper, oregano, parsley, basil, and rosemary. Stir in Parmesan cheese. Simmer over low heat for 1 to 2 more hours, adding more water if it thickens more than you like. The longer it simmers, the more deeply flavored the sauce. Stir in the meatballs, if using, and spoon over hot, freshly cooked pasta.

GOING DOWN TO ROSEDALE . . .

★ **White Front Café (aka Joe's Hot Tamale Place).** 902 South Main Street. 662-759-3842.

★ **Blue Levee.** 1310 South Main Street. 662-759-6333.

Rosedale, about ten miles west of Cleveland in the shadow of the levee near the Arkansas line, holds a secure spot in blues history. Some folks claim that it was in this dusty old town at the intersection of Mississippi highways 1 and 8—and not the crossroads in Clarksdale—where Robert Johnson made his infamous deal with Old Scratch. Johnson sang about "going down to Rosedale" in "Traveling Riverside Blues"—a song covered by Led Zeppelin and Eric Clapton. A historical marker placed there by the Mississippi Blues Trail Commission denotes the locale's significance.

On August 26, 2011, the commission unveiled Rosedale's second historical marker, in front of the White Front Café, this one a tribute to the significance of tamales in blues music (the subject of the Reverend Moses Mason's "Molly Man" and Johnson's oft-recorded classic, "They're Red Hot") and to Joe Pope, revered as a tamale maker. Pope made tamales and sold them out of this white clapboard grocery store for more than thirty years. His recipe was an adaptation of one an acquaintance had gotten from a Mexican migrant in the 1930s. Several other vendors in the Delta credit Pope for teaching them the technique. In December 2004 he passed away, leaving his sister Barbara to carry on the tradition.

For seven years, Barbara Pope helped her ailing oldest brother fill and roll tamales. Not until the week before his death did he share the recipe with her and their sisters.

Cheerful and tidy on the inside, with ruffly curtains, a few oilcloth-covered tables, and an overhead television set, the White Front is a comfortable spot to stop for lunch. Some customers bring their own containers for the tamales and ask for the juice separately—for dipping bread or even dressing a salad.

Should you find yourself in Rosedale hungry for a full meal, check out the Blue Levee down the street, a funky little restaurant near the other Blues Trail marker at the famed intersection. Though it recently changed hands, the original owners left behind their recipe file, and their legendary fried okra appetizers continue to be scarfed down like popcorn (see recipe, page 138.

DELTA MAGAZINE

★ **Delta Magazine.** www.deltamagazine.com

The Mississippi Delta is often described as "one big small town." *Delta Magazine* explains what that means every other month. Based in Cleveland, this slick lifestyle publication founded in 2003 covers the region as if it were a cosmopolitan city made up of many neighborhoods, instead of one massive tract of farmland dotted with small, timeworn towns and villages. Its content strays frequently to Jackson and Oxford.

Publisher Scott Coopwood and editor Melissa Baker Townsend are fifth-generation Deltans who revel in the character of the region. In every issue are sections devoted to Delta art, music, history, shopping, and home décor that ranges from high design to hunting camp.

But more often than not, the lion's share of copy is devoted to eating out and eating in. Townsend is an avid cook and entertainer, and her features have included comparative taste tests of local chicken salads to go, recipes from the files of Italian immigrant families, and garden party menus depicting southern belles in wide-brimmed hats. She regularly drops cooking hints only a Deltan could fully appreciate—like the fact that Indianola Pecan House from time to time packages the little praline bits left over from manufacture, and "we know they make everything from sweet potato casseroles to salads taste better."

Catfish Crostini

The Delta Magazine Cookbook: A Celebrated Collection of Recipes and Culinary Traditions from the Most Southern Place on Earth (Coopwood Publishing, 2011) features the greatest recipe hits published during its first eight years. Some come from chefs and great local cooks; some pay tribute to favorite community cookbooks, like this one. Catfish bread—a variation on Italian garlic bread in which the split loaves are spread with a rich and spicy catfish and cheese mixture and then broiled—has appeared in community cookbooks and as an appetizer in catfish restaurants. *Delta Magazine* editor Melissa Townsend modified the original recipe from the Belzoni Garden Club cookbook, *All Rolled in One*, to create this somewhat more refined, but equally addictive, variation.

MAKES 48 PIECES

1 pound skinless catfish fillets
1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning blend
½ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted
½ cup mayonnaise
½ teaspoon garlic powder
1½ tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
¼ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper
4 ounces sliced black olives, drained
4 ounces grated mozzarella cheese (1 cup)
4 ounces grated extra-sharp white Cheddar cheese (1 cup)
2 baguettes, each cut crosswise into 24 slices that are about ¼-inch-thick
2 ounces shredded Parmesan cheese (½ cup)

Preheat the broiler. Arrange the fillets on a rimmed baking sheet and sprinkle with the Cajun seasoning, salt, and pepper. Broil until the fish is cooked through, 8 to 10 minutes. Crumble the fish with a fork. You should have about 2 cups of crumbled fish. Transfer it into a large bowl and let cool to room temperature.

Stir in the butter, mayonnaise, garlic powder, Worcestershire, lemon juice, and cayenne. Stir in the olives, mozzarella, and Cheddar. Check the seasoning.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Mound about 2 tablespoons of the catfish mixture onto each baguette slice. Arrange in a single layer on a baking sheet. Sprinkle the tops with the Parmesan cheese. Bake until the topping is a little bubbly and lightly browned on top, 8 to 10 minutes. Serve hot.

GRITS AND CORNMEAL, WITH DELTA ROOTS

★ **Delta Grind.** 205 Dupuy Street. Water Valley. 662-202-6822. www.deltagrind.com

★ **The Original Grit Girl.** www.gritgirl.net

A 1910 gristmill languished on a piece of Delta farmland for decades. Then, in 2001, Freddie Ross, a farmer who lived in the Bolivar County community of Scott, rescued the rare antique. He bought and restored a Fairbanks-Morse flywheel engine from the same period, and soon he and his wife, Georgeanne, were grinding dried corn into grits and cornmeal for themselves and neighbors. A Memphis chef heard about the fresh-ground meal and asked for a sample. Requests from other restaurateurs followed. Georgeanne, a former bookkeeper, found herself with a new calling and identity—as the "Grit Girl" and CEO of Delta Grind. When the Rosses moved to Oxford, they took the mill and continued to grind corn grown in nearby Water Valley.

In 2008, the Rosses sold Delta Grind to John and Becky Tatum, who'd worked with Georgeanne at a restaurant in Oxford. Today the Tatums live in Water Valley, where they operate the mill and run the southern-focused White Star Kitchen. The original mill has been retired and replaced by three more modern gristmills, but the grinding techniques, the Tatums say, are no different from those used a century ago. Like the Rosses, they offer four grades of meal: grits (the coarsest), cornmeal, polenta, and masa flour (the finest).

All the Tatums' offerings begin with corn grown on nearby farms. Most recently, a farmer in Charleston, Mississippi, has begun growing a small patch of some of the first organic corn in the region for the Tatums. They buy the grain in small batches, which they grind the Sunday after purchase. The meal is bagged and delivered to restaurants and specialty stores throughout the South. The couple has expanded the line to include a cornbread mix and a fish-fry coating, and Becky is assembling a cookbook.

Meanwhile, Georgeanne Ross—after a brief retirement—began grinding corn again under the label the Original Grit Girl, selling wholesale on a smaller scale to a handful of restaurants.

THE ART OF DELTA CHICKEN SALAD

★ **FOLKS IN THE DELTA** cannot get enough chicken salad. Rare is the lunch menu that doesn't offer it the classic way—plenty of real mayo (no Miracle Whip!), chopped celery, at least a touch of onion, and more often than not, a dollop or two of sweet pickle relish. Where the recipe goes from there varies a bit from one place to the next, with all the cooks boasting that theirs is the best.

Charlotte Skelton built her chicken salad reputation at À la Carte Alley, her first restaurant in downtown Cleveland. After she sold the restaurant in 2006, she continued to make her chicken salad for catering stints and later at Crave, her second restaurant venture. Her son, Marc Walden, a classically trained chef who now owns restaurants in Mobile, contributed his version of chicken salad to the menu as well, using the traditional methods his mother taught him as a starting point. He accentuates the southern flavors by adding dried peaches and chopped, spiced pecans—a Delta classic in and of itself for which there are a thousand variations.

Charlotte's Traditional Delta-Style Chicken Salad

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

5 cups shredded poached chicken breasts (recipe follows)
½ cup chopped celery
¼ cup sweet pickle relish
1¼ cups mayonnaise
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon sugar
¼ teaspoon celery salt
1 teaspoon chopped dried onion or 1 tablespoon freshly grated onion
⅛ teaspoon onion powder
Pinch of dry mustard (optional)
Salt and ground white pepper, to taste

In a large mixing bowl, stir together the chicken, celery, and relish. In a medium bowl, stir together the mayonnaise, mustard, lemon juice, honey, sugar, celery salt, dried onion, onion powder, and dry mustard, if using. Fold the mayonnaise mixture into the chicken mixture. Season with salt and white pepper. Cover and chill well before serving, at least 4 hours and preferably overnight. Serve chilled.

Marc's Chicken Salad with Peach Mayonnaise and Spiced Pecans

"Marc originally used smoked chicken breasts for this recipe, but when we opened Crave we couldn't get our smoker to work," Skelton said. "We then tried it using the white meat of rotisserie chicken. It was excellent like that. We haven't been doing as many rotisserie chickens right now, so we have been poaching the breasts." I tried this recipe with smoked chicken, and it was a sensational match with the peach mayonnaise.

MAKES 10 TO 12 SERVINGS

1½ cups mayonnaise (preferably Duke's)
½ cup fresh peach puree (from 1 or 2 peaches)
2½ tablespoons honey
2 teaspoons sugar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
¾ teaspoon minced fresh garlic
8 cups shredded poached chicken breasts (recipe follows), smoked chicken, or rotisserie chicken
¾ cup chopped red onion
½ cup diced dried peaches or apricots
½ cup Spiced Pecans (recipe follows)
1 to 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
Salt and ground black pepper, to taste

In a medium bowl, stir together the mayonnaise and peach puree. Stir in the honey, sugar, Dijon mustard, and garlic.

In a large bowl, stir together the chicken, onion, dried peaches, and Spiced Pecans. Stir in the mayonnaise mixture. Fold in the parsley. Season with salt and pepper. Cover and chill before serving.

POACHED CHICKEN

MAKES 8 CUPS SHREDDED OR CUBED CHICKEN

6 pounds skinless, bone-in chicken breast halves
1 carrot, halved
1 celery stalk, halved
1 medium onion, quartered
Handful of parsley sprigs
1 tablespoon seasoned salt
2 teaspoons peppercorns
10 to 12 cups water

In a large saucepan, combine the chicken breasts, carrot, celery, onion, parsley sprigs, seasoned salt, and peppercorns. Cover with water and bring just to a boil. Reduce the heat to very low and cover. Poach the chicken until just cooked through, 20 to 30 minutes.

While the chicken is still warm, pull the meat from the bones and shred it into bite-sized pieces. Discard the bones. If desired, strain the poaching liquid and store, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 3 days or freeze for up to 3 months.

SPICED PECANS

MAKES 1 POUND

1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
1 teaspoon chili powder
¾ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon paprika
¼ teaspoon garlic salt
¼ teaspoon onion powder
¼ teaspoon ground cumin
¼ teaspoon curry powder
⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
3 tablespoons butter
1 pound pecan halves

Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a small bowl, stir together the brown sugar, chili powder, salt, paprika, garlic salt, onion powder, cumin, curry powder, and cayenne. Put the butter on a rimmed baking sheet and place in the oven to melt. Remove the pan from the oven. Pour the pecans onto the pan, sprinkle them with the spice mix, and toss to coat. Spread the pecans in a single layer and bake until the nuts are fragrant, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature. Store in an airtight container for up to 1 week or freeze for longer storage.

HOT
TAMALES
TO GO
HOT TAMALES $5
GOOD

GREENVILLE

Athens of the Delta

THE DESTINY OF EVERY DELTA TOWN is tied to the Mississippi River, but none as deeply as Greenville, the region's unofficial capital.

Greenville lies on the eastern bank of Lake Ferguson, an oxbow lake formed when the Mississippi River changed course. Several floating casinos are docked along its waterfront, where crowds gather for concerts, picnics, and fishing tournaments. But driving through the city, you may not even notice the water; a massive grassy levee conceals it from the rather forlorn downtown area on the other side.

More than eighty years ago, the Mississippi burst through the levee about twelve miles upriver, submerging the city in ten feet of water and engulfing much of the Delta. The Great Flood of 1927 has been called the worst natural disaster in the nation's history, with societal and economic repercussions that linger today.

The flood has been the subject of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, poetry and music. Greenville boasts "more authors per square inch than any American city," a claim that was continuously reinforced at the McCormick Book Inn, one of the region's best-loved repositories of southern literature for nearly half a century. William Alexander Percy's 1941 memoir

Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planters' Son was always in stock. So were the novels of his nephew, Walker Percy, who spent his teens in Greenville. Shelby Foote, Ellen Douglas, David Cohn, Angela Jackson, and newspaper publisher and Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Hodding Carter II were also well represented. In late 2011 longtime proprietors Hugh and Mary Dayle McCormick retired and put the store up for sale. As of this writing, no one has stepped up to fill the void. In the meantime, you can browse many of those titles at the William Alexander Percy Memorial Library on Main Street.

Blue blood and high drama are at the core of Greenville's history, which began in 1828 about three miles south of its present site. Wealthy planters arriving from the Carolinas, Virginia, and Kentucky brought with them fine possessions, tutors for their children, and slave labor needed to transform the wilderness into farmland.

For several decades the town thrived as a cultural hub and trading center, until it succumbed to the ravages of the Civil War. The city rebounded, on land donated by a prominent widow named Harriet Blanton Theobold. Her generosity would earn her the unofficial title of "the Mother of Greenville." As Greenville's agricultural fortunes grew again, so did its reputation as one of the region's most cosmopolitan and open-minded cities. Significant numbers of Jewish merchants arrived, finding acceptance and establishing themselves as leading members of Greenville government and society. Several of its first mayors were Jewish.

In the early 1900s, race relations in Greenville were civil by the standards of the Jim Crow South. This was largely due to the leadership of LeRoy Percy, a member of one of the Delta's most prestigious families who ran both a highly successful law practice and plantations exceeding twenty thousand acres.

Percy, the very definition of Delta aristocracy and for a time a U.S. senator, fought hard to keep the Ku Klux Klan out of the Delta and sought protections and opportunities for African Americans rare in other parts of the region. Part of Percy's motivation was undeniably self-interest; his abundant farmland was dependent on a large workforce. But he was also guided by noblesse oblige, and his son, William Alexander Percy, a Harvard-educated lawyer and a poet, followed in that tradition.

That code of honor, however, was tested in 1927, when the levee broke. LeRoy Percy put his son in charge of Red Cross relief efforts. Will Percy arranged to evacuate the thousands of black sharecroppers stranded on the levee who had been stacking sandbags around the clock. But those efforts

were thwarted by planters including his own father, who feared the region would lose its labor force. An uncounted number of the sharecroppers died.

For months Greenville resembled Venice, with townsfolk navigating the flooded streets in rowboats and walking along raised walkways in front of the commercial buildings. Steamboats arrived to dispatch scores of mostly white women and children to higher ground, while African American refugees were ordered to live in makeshift tents and aid in levee repairs and relief efforts—sometimes at gunpoint.

Once the waters receded, the refugees migrated northward in droves, forever changing the old order of the Delta. Greenville rebuilt itself yet again, but it never regained the prosperity it had once enjoyed. Race relations festered, although the city held on to a relatively progressive reputation partly due to Hodding Carter II, the Pulitzer Prize–winning publisher of the *Delta Democrat-Times*. He became widely known as the "Spokesman of the New South" for his editorial stance against social and economic intolerance.

Though still the largest city in the Mississippi Delta south of Memphis, Greenville's population—about thirty-five thousand now—has been falling for years. Locals are optimistic the new four-lane Greenville Bridge that extends nearly four miles over the Mississippi to Lake Village, Arkansas, will bring new traffic and tourist dollars. History buffs and those otherwise not bent on gaming can take in the **Winterville Mounds and Museum** on the outskirts of town, with prehistoric relics of the mound-building American Indian civilization that occupied the territory thousands of years ago. The library of the Greek-style **Hebrew Union Synagogue** has a "wall of memories" recounting the contributions of Delta Jews, including early mayors. And each March, the congregation hosts its annual **Corned Beef Luncheon**, as they have for more than a hundred years, with corned beef shipped from Chicago's Vienna Beef Company.

There's also a museum devoted to fire-fighting history in a former firehouse, a history museum specializing in the Great Flood of 1927, and a children's museum housing a vintage carousel.

The Percy plot in the **Greenville Cemetery** is one of the city's most visited attractions. In a shady corner is a bronze statue called *The Patriot*, a brooding medieval knight in chain mail. Will Percy commissioned his friend the acclaimed New York artist Malvina Hoffman to sculpt it to mark the grave of his father. Within easy walking distance are the Jewish, Chinese, and African American cemeteries. In the latter is the grave of Holt Collier, the black Confederate soldier and bear hunter famed for accompanying President Theodore Roosevelt on the expedition in which the president

refused to shoot a bear, thus inspiring a toy manufacturer to create the Teddy Bear.

Food remains at the forefront of Greenville's carefully guarded traditions. Longtime residents gather regularly at Doe's Eat Place, the legendary steakhouse that's been attracting carnivores since the 1940s. And they enthusiastically support tamale vendors, soul food haunts, independent burger joints, and the occasional newcomer who offers a fresh venue to get together with friends.

★ **Doe's Eat Place.** 502 Nelson Street. 662-334-3315; 662-254-8081. www.doeseatplace.com

Everything about the dining experience at Doe's Eat Place leaves an impression. Even the way you enter. You open a rusty screen door and stride directly into a cluttered, clamorous kitchen. The smell of sizzling beef envelops you. Brawny men with sweat pouring down their cheeks and meat forks clutched in their fists dart between roaring ovens to check T-bones and Porterhouses broiling under glowing gas burners. You walk across the warped floor past a hulking gas stove where a cook fries potatoes in an ancient skillet of bubbling oil. At a counter, the silver-haired woman everyone calls Aunt Florence tosses iceberg lettuce and tomatoes with her legendary lemon vinaigrette in a huge wooden bowl. Finally, with kitchen scents clinging to your clothes and hair, you enter the dining area and take a seat in one of America's great steakhouses.

Doe's Eat Place is beyond casual. Beer art, a basketball calendar, autographed photos of sports legends and beauty queens, medals, and award certificates decorate the paneled walls. In both the kitchen and the adjoining dining room, customers cram elbow to elbow around rickety tables draped with oilcloth printed in a hodgepodge of motifs: grapes, sunflowers, Santa Clauses, Easter bunnies.

Amid chatter punctuated with peals of laughter, the diners pour wine into water glasses, nibble crackers in between bites of tamale, pass around platters of pudgy, golden fries, and carve forty-ounce sirloins into slices to share with tablemates. Other specialties on the menu—gumbo, chili, spaghetti, jumbo shrimp broiled and deep-fried—have their adherents. But you haven't been baptized in the Doe's tradition until you've had a tamale trio, Aunt Florence's salad, a steak, and some of those amazing fries dragged through a puddle of those savory steak drippings.

COLD
shing!

Despite its ramshackle setting in this little white frame building on the seedy side of town—or maybe because of it—Doe's Eat Place continues to rack up accolades as one of the top steakhouses in the country. The story of how this unlikely temple of gastronomy came to be undoubtedly adds to the flavor.

The building dates back to at least 1903, when Italian immigrant Carmel Signa moved to Greenville and opened a grocery. The Signas lived in a house behind the store, which sold pantry staples, mostly to other immigrant families. In the Great Flood of 1927, the building was spared, but not the business. For several years, Carmel's son Dominick, aka "Big Doe," sold bootleg hooch to help the family rebuild their finances. Big Doe worked several other jobs, including one at the Greenville Air Base cafeteria, where someone gave him a recipe for tamales. He gave it to his wife, Mamie, who tinkered with it until she came up with a formula they liked.

In 1941, Big Doe and Mamie turned the old grocery store into a restaurant. The Signas operated the front of the store as a juke joint catering only to blacks, with inexpensive menu items like buffalo fish and chili, along with tamales. In the back of the store, whites would come by with their pots from home to get tamales to go. A local doctor would drop by for a bite to eat between calls. Sometimes he'd bring a steak from the grocery store and ask Big Doe to cook it for him.

Mamie, meanwhile, would cook traditional Italian fare like spaghetti or stuffed eggplant for the family and offer that to folks who dropped by as well. Word of their back-door offerings spread. Eventually the demand for the steaks, spicy tamales, and other dishes was so steady, the family shut down the juke joint to focus on the food.

Older Greenville residents have fond memories of dining at Doe's with baby beds and diapered toddlers in plain view. During the civil rights heyday, Greenville's powerful civic leaders would bring journalists and politicians from all over to dine at Doe's.

When Big Doe retired in 1974, he turned the restaurant over to his sons, Charles and Little Doe, who have continued to rack up accolades. In 2007 the James Beard Foundation named Doe's Eat Place an American Classic. They've replaced cornhusks with parchment for wrapping the tamales and extrude the cornmeal and meat mixture through a clunky metal contraption rather than forming them individually by hand. But the recipe, they say, is true to their mother's formula. They now bottle and sell that seasoning mixture, both retail and also to the dozen or so Doe's franchises now scattered through Arkansas, Mississippi, and several other states.

But only in Greenville will you find the fat and faded guestbook scrawled with sentiments along the lines of what CBS news commentator Dan Rather succinctly wrote in 1979: "Fantastic; I'm full as a tick; best ever."

★ Jim's Café. 314 Washington Avenue. 662-332-5951.

On a high shelf at the back of Jim's Café in Greenville is a metal box with a slot in the top, calling for nominees for "the Squawking Seagull Award." This honor, explained Danny Jones, is presented roughly once a year to "whoever does the most fussing."

Apparently, the competition's pretty stiff. The regulars of this longstanding breakfast and lunch spot are quick to praise the rib-sticking, home-style cooking. But more than that, they appreciate having a place to "try to solve the world's problems—hopefully by nine o'clock," says Jones, the last of the morning crowd who was still nursing his cup of coffee. "It may not be what you want to hear, but you can always get a good conversation."

Such spirited discussions have been taking place in this little brick storefront—still named for original owner Jim Hodges—in the center of Greenville's business district since the 1920s. Gus Johnson took over from his Greek immigrant father in 1959 and more often than not can be found behind the cash register, often adding his two cents to whatever discussions

are going on around him. Each morning Johnson comes in at about four a.m. to start breakfast. Then a cook arrives to start preparing the lunch specials.

Among the most popular is his barbecued rib tips, especially since Alton Brown, the popular Food Network host, stopped in a few years ago and ordered them for breakfast, over pancakes, for his *Feasting with Asphalt* program. (The rib tips, says Johnson, is an old family recipe, and the pancakes he makes himself every morning. But it was Brown's idea to put the two together.)

Truer to the flavor of Jim's Place is the house hot sauce bottled in mismatched whiskey bottles, randomly interspersed between boxes of BC Powder and Alka-Seltzer in the glass case underneath the cash register. The recipe is Johnson's, as are the labels, which read: "Gus Johnson's Original Homemade Gourmet Hot Sauce made with Old Bottles and an Old Recipe. This Special Blend of Jim's Hot Sauce is NOT FOR SISSIES."

He also makes his version of the creamy, spicy Comeback Dressing popular all over Mississippi, which he keeps in a refrigerator case and sells by the jug to those who know to ask for it.

MORE LOCAL FLAVOR

★ **Buck's Restaurant.** 152 North Harvey Street. 662-334-3301.

This brightly lit soul food café in a strip mall has the kind of friendly, community-oriented atmosphere that makes it an appealing choice for political photo ops. Barack Obama stopped in for breakfast on the campaign trail. Celebrities like B. B. King, Little Milton, and Phylicia Rashad have also visited. A professional tennis coach who has helped more than a dozen kids get tennis scholarships, S. B. Buck and his wife, Demetris, have built a strong following for specialties that include barbecue, smothered chicken with rice and gravy, liver and onions, macaroni and cheese, and peach cobbler.

★ **Gino's Hamburgers.** 128 West Reed Road. 662-378-9655.

This family-owned joint with a spotless retro dining room plays oldies on a jukebox and proudly touts the fact that it's been grinding its own beef for burgers and tacos for more than thirty years. The catfish po-boys are a local institution.

★ **Hot Tamale Heaven.** 1640 Highway 82 East. 662-378-2240.

Aside from selling their tamales from small stands and carts in various locations in and around Greenville, the Harmon family has a USDA-approved wholesale plant that delivers to restaurants all over the state. From the window of the little trailer, you can order tamales wrapped in corn husks, layered with chili and cheese in a "tamale pie," or deep-fried, with ranch dressing on the side. A "heavenly sampler" consists of three regular tamales, one deep-fried tamale, three Buffalo wings, fries, and slaw.

★ **Scott's Hot Tamales.** 304 Martin Luther King Boulevard. 662-332-4013.

The children and grandchildren of Elizabeth and Aaron Scott have racked up numerous trophies at regional tamale-making competitions for their family's version of the local staple. Made with beef brisket and a secret spice blend, the recipe was given to Aaron by a Mexican man while stationed in the army in San Antonio around 1950. After he and his wife perfected the technique, they started selling tamales from a push cart. Now they are made in a kitchen adjoining one of the family's homes and sold from a wooden stand the size of a tollbooth.

★ **Posecai's.** 1433 Trailwood Drive. 662-378-3688.

Ted Posecai apprenticed under leading New Orleans restaurateur Frank Brigsten before relocating to Greenville and opening a white-tablecloth restaurant in an 1896 blue-gray Craftsman house. Posecai emphasizes the flavors of his Creole grandmother's kitchen, while also dishing out Delta standards like fried dill pickles and catfish platters. He also offers an ambitious roster of more specialized fare, from sushi to shrimp-stuffed mirliton. He has demonstrated dishes on local television with Leland-raised Lauren Farms freshwater prawns and other homegrown ingredients.

★ **Sherman's Restaurant.** 1400 South Main Street. 662-332-6924.
www.shermansrestaurant.net

This nondescript brick structure has been a Main Street fixture here since Charles and Rosalea Sherman opened it as a grocery store and meat market in 1947. Tourists often bypass it for quirkier places like Doe's, but locals find a lot to love here. In 1985, the Shermans' son, Charles, Jr., and

his wife, Carole, converted it into a full-scale restaurant, and it doesn't appear to have changed a lot since. Wildlife prints and framed jerseys signed by members of the Manning football dynasty adorn its beige walls. Some of the waitresses seem to have been around forever. The lengthy menu, too, feels comfortable and familiar: fried dill pickles and tamales for starters; salads, sandwiches, and southern plate specials for lunch; and steak and seafood for dinner, all served with baskets of freshly baked yeast rolls. Their lemon ice box pie—bordered with whole vanilla wafers and piled high with meringue—is stellar.

LITERARY GREENVILLE: TASTEFUL INSIGHTS FROM SIX LOCAL WORDSMITHS

Local legends Hugh and Mary Dayle McCormick, former proprietors of the now-defunct McCormick Book Inn, used to tell customers it's something in the water they drink that makes Greenville's writers so prolific. For $3.95, they would even sell you a bottle of "Greenville's Finest Genuine Brown Water . . . guaranteed to make you wanna write . . . From our tap to your typewriter."

Probably no one reinforced that reputation more than William Alexander Percy: a poet, planter, Harvard-educated lawyer, and son of LeRoy Percy, one of the region's most powerful leaders. His nephew, the novelist Walker Percy, and his two siblings came to live with him as a teenager, after their parents died. In the foreword to Will Percy's 1941 classic memoir *Lanterns on the Levee*, Walker described his uncle's house as "a standard stopover for all manner of people who were trying to 'understand the South,' that perennial American avocation, and whether or not they succeeded, it was as valuable for me to try to understand them as to be understood."

The houseguests, he wrote, included the likes of William Faulkner, Dorothy Parker, Langston Hughes, and a steady stream of "poets, politicians, psychiatrists, sociologists, black preachers, folk singers, itinerant harmonica players." Will also introduced Walker to Shelby Foote, then a teenager also, and the two became lifetime friends whose Delta roots, as well as their relationship with Will Percy, would influence their later writings.

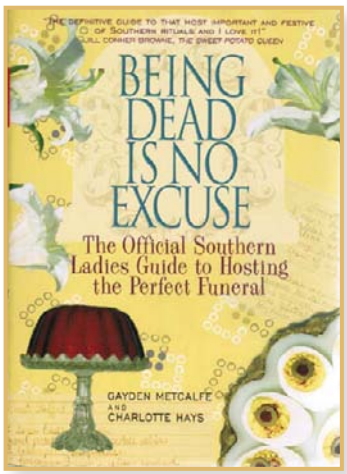
Greenville area writers then and now have revealed a great deal about Delta foodways—in memoirs, cookbooks, and interviews.

WILLIAM ALEXANDER PERCY: Mint Juleps

Lanterns on the Levee continues to offer insights into early Delta aristocracy. One lengthy passage in the book that has been picked up and repeated many times—including in several cookbooks—is his vivid description of his mother Camille's mint julep, which she made in summer for meetings between his father and VIP guests:

> Certainly her juleps had nothing in common with those hybrid concoctions one buys in bars the world over under that name. It would have been sacrilege to add lemon, or a slice of orange or of pineapple, or one of those wretched maraschino cherries.
>
> First you needed excellent bourbon whisky; rye or Scotch would not do at all. Then you put half an inch of sugar in the bottom of the glass and merely dampened it with water. Next, very quickly—and here was the trick in the procedure—you crushed your ice, actually powdered it, preferably in a towel with a wooden mallet, so quickly that it remained dry, and, slipping two sprigs of fresh mint against the inside of the glass, you crammed the ice right to the brim, crushing it with your hand. Last you filled the glass, which apparently had no room for anything else, with bourbon, the older the better, and grated a bit of nutmeg on top.
>
> The glass immediately frosted and you settled back in your chair for half an hour of sedate cumulative bliss. Although you stirred the sugar at the end of the half hour, it never all melted, therefore at the end of the half hour there was left a delicious mess of ice and mint and whisky which a small boy was allowed to consume with calm rapture.

GAYDEN METCALFE AND CHARLOTTE HAYS: Funeral Food


BEING DEAD IS NO EXCUSE
The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral
GAYDEN METCALFE AND CHARLOTTE HAYS

Southern blue-bloods are famous for the lavish way they honor the deceased—especially among the First Families of Greenville—or "FFGs," as Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays call them. "After the solemnity of the church service and finality of the grave," Metcalfe and Hays write in their best-selling volume *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting a Perfect Funeral*, "the people of the Mississippi Delta are just dying to get to the house of the bereaved for the reception. Sometimes we talk bad about the deceased between the grave and the aspic, but we straighten up and are on our best behavior the minute we get to the house. We're people with a strong sense of community, and being dead is no impediment to belonging

to it. We won't forget you because you up and died. We may even like you better and visit more often." As lifetime members of the FFGs, Metcalfe and Hays have plenty of familiarity with southern funerary traditions, and their 2005 book puts that first-hand experience to work, featuring a wide selection of the tried-and-true recipes that most often show up on the funeral reception smorgasbord whenever a member of the local high society passes on. Caramel cake ranks among their top ten funeral foods "you can't leave Earth without," as do fried chicken, stuffed eggs, homemade rolls, and beef tenderloin. But the number one spot goes to tomato aspic with homemade mayonnaise, a dish that's never fallen out of fashion in the Delta.

The following three recipes are abridged from the book *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral* by Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays. Copyright 2005 by Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays. Reprinted by permission of Miramax Books. All rights reserved.

Tomato Aspic

"We've never been to a funeral where homemade aspic wasn't served," write Metcalfe and Hayes. "Store-bought aspic is available, but no self-respecting Southerner would be caught dead—sorry—eating it. If you've never had real tomato aspic, you're in for a treat."

This is the recipe Gayden uses most often because it is equally delicious with just mayonnaise or with pickled shrimp, avocado slices, and other trimmings. She adds: "I like to double this recipe. In that case, I use a 10-cup Bundt pan."

MAKES 10 SERVINGS

4 cups tomato juice
6 slices lemon
3 slices yellow onion, separated into rings
2 bay leaves
Tops of one bunch of celery
Several whole cloves
4 envelopes Knox unflavored gelatin
½ cup apple cider vinegar
3 tablespoons horseradish
1½ teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce (Lea & Perrins)

Put the tomato juice, lemon slices, onion slices, bay leaves, celery tops, and cloves in a heavy pot and simmer for 20 minutes, more or less. While this simmers, mix together the gelatin and vinegar. Strain the tomato juice mixture and add the gelatin mixture. No lumps! Add horseradish, salt, pepper, lemon juice, and Worcestershire sauce. Taste and correct seasoning.

Lightly oil a 6-cup mold. Pour the mixture into the mold and chill until firm, several hours or overnight. Overnight is best. Unmold on a bed of greens. If the aspic will not come out of the pan easily, run a knife around the edge or dip the pan into a sink of hot water—just for a second!

Homemade Mayonnaise

"People act as if it takes an act of God to make homemade mayonnaise," write Metcalfe and Hays. "It doesn't. But there is a real debate in Gayden's family as to whether homemade mayonnaise should be thick or thin. Her mother swears by runny, but Gayden's tends to be a little more firm. Of course, her mother makes hers by hand with an old-fashioned Wesson oil-plunger contraption. Here's her version."

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

1 large egg
1½ cups vegetable oil
1½ tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1½ teaspoons Tabasco sauce
1 tablespoon lemon juice
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon white pepper

Assemble all ingredients. Put the egg in the food processor. Pulse for 30 seconds, and then add the oil slowly, while pulsing. When the desired consistency is reached, add the other ingredients until they are blended. This doesn't take very long! Of course, taste and adjust mayonnaise seasonings. But know: If you blend too long you will get a version that is too thick. This seems to be the preferred lady consistency.

Refrigerate for at least an hour, as the taste improves. We always have a jar of this in the icebox, and it hasn't killed us yet.

Pickled Shrimp

"Pickled shrimp are perfect with aspic," write Metcalfe and Hayes. "Without aspic, they are more appropriate for a cocktail party than for lunch after the funeral. Although our mothers wore dark colors and didn't go out socially for months after a death in the family, we no longer observe an official period of mourning, even in the Mississippi Delta. Still, we'd be shocked if you gave a cocktail party too soon. There's nothing to stop a friend from having a restorative cocktail for you, however, as long as it's not done in unseemly haste."

MAKES 20 APPETIZER SERVINGS, 12 FIRST-COURSE SERVINGS

5 pounds shrimp
7 teaspoons salt
1 cup celery tops
½ cup pickling spice
4 cups sliced onions
A few bay leaves
2½ cups salad oil
1½ cups white vinegar
5 teaspoons celery seeds
2 teaspoons salt
1 (3.5-ounce) jar of capers, drained

Drop the shrimp into boiling water to which salt, celery tops, and pickling spice have been added. Boil 8 minutes. Drain immediately and cool. DO NOT LET THE SHRIMP OVERCOOK. Peel and de-vein the shrimp. Using a large glass container, alternate layers of shrimp with onion slices and bay leaves.

Mix the salad oil, vinegar, celery seeds, and salt. Pour over the shrimp. Drain the capers and add them to the shrimp. Place the container in the refrigerator for at least three days. Turn once or twice a day, without fail.

To serve, drain, reserving liquid in case you have shrimp left over.

JULIA REED: A Delta Hostess in the Big Apple and the Big Easy

As a member of one of the Delta's most prominent political families, Julia Reed has built a reputation as an authority on the social South, in magazine essays and books and in the frequent and often lavish parties she throws in her homes in New York and New Orleans. In her 2008 collection of essays *Ham Biscuits, Hostess Gowns, and Other Southern Specialties*, she describes growing up in Greenville—a place where restaurants were few and "giving a party was as natural as breathing. . . . We give food away as presents and peace offerings, and sometimes because it's just so incredibly good that we have no choice but to share it."

While southerners from genteel families all over the South could relate to those aspects of Reed's upbringing, her childhood was anything but ordinary. Her father, Clarke Reed, has been credited with masterminding the modern Mississippi Republican Party after a century of one-party Democratic rule, and he often brought her along to meet U.S. presidents and other dignitaries.

Just as legendary is his love of food and drink—and his enthusiasm for hobnobbing regularly with politicians and reporters of every stripe, usually at Doe's Eat Place. Hodding Carter III, a liberal Democrat who was then editor of Greenville's *Delta Democrat-Times*, was one of his best drinking buddies. In the family tradition, Julia gathers with friends whenever she's

in town at Doe's for steak, tamales, and friendly debate, with plenty of paper bags filled with store-bought wine to go around.

In the spring of 2009, Reed came back to her hometown to participate in a panel during Mississippi Delta Literary Tour, which included a stop at her parents' house for a quintessentially Greenville-style cocktail party. Nibbles included spiced pecans, cheese straws, ham biscuits, and a chafing dish brimming with a rich crabmeat dip. The recipe was not provided, but it bore a striking resemblance to the one that follows.

Crabmeat à la Mornay

This unabashedly rich concoction is featured in the 1970 classic community cookbook *Bayou Cuisine* by the St. Stephen's Episcopal Church of Indianola. Julia Reed also includes an adaptation of it in *Ham Biscuits, Hostess Gowns, and Other Southern Specialties.* At parties, it is served with crackers or toasts or spooned into pastry shells. It also dresses up a plain broiled or sautéed mild fish fillet such as tilapia, catfish, flounder, or grouper. (Run under broiler for a minute or two if desired.) Or, ladle it over a baked potato or mix it with pasta.

MAKES ABOUT 4½ CUPS

¼ pound (1 stick) unsalted butter
1 cup chopped green onions
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 cups heavy cream
8 ounces grated Swiss or Gruyere cheese (2 cups)
1 tablespoon dry sherry
½ teaspoon salt, or to taste
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste
1 pound fresh lump crabmeat
½ cup finely chopped parsley
Melba toast rounds or pastry shells

Melt butter in a heavy medium-size saucepan over medium heat. Add onions and sauté about 5 minutes, until tender. Whisk in flour; cook 2 minutes longer. Slowly whisk in the cream; cook and stir about 5 minutes, until thickened and bubbly. Add cheese; cook and stir until melted, 2 or 3 minutes longer. Stir in sherry, salt, and cayenne pepper. Gently fold in crabmeat and the parsley. Transfer to a chafing dish and serve warm, with Melba toast rounds or spooned into pastry shells to set on a buffet table or pass on trays.

SHELBY FOOTE: A Scholar of Civil War History . . . and Cornbread

Shelby Foote drew heavily from his Delta upbringing in a handful of well-received novels that include *Tournament* (1949), *Follow Me Down* (1950), and *Love in a Dry Season* (1951). But it is his work as a historian for which he is best known, including a much-praised three-volume history of the Civil War. In 1990, Foote's genteel drawl and engaging storytelling style figured prominently in Ken Burns's eleven-hour Civil War documentary.

Shelby Foote's Mississippi Cornbread

The Civil War scholar shared the recipe he perfected at his Memphis home, and it is a classic, as southern as you can get: all meal and no flour, buttermilk, and a hot, lard-seasoned skillet. It has since become my standard go-to cornbread recipe. (Some die-hard southerners may blast the tablespoon of sugar called for, but I find it adds just the right hint of sweetness to accentuate the corn taste without turning it into cake.)

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

1 cup stone-ground cornmeal
1 tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup buttermilk
2 large eggs
3 tablespoons bacon grease, lard, or vegetable shortening

Preheat the oven to 450°F.

In a large bowl, stir together the cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. In a small bowl, beat together the buttermilk and eggs. Make a well in the center of the cornmeal mixture and pour in the buttermilk mixture. Stir with a wooden spoon only until mixed.

Meanwhile, place a 9-inch cast-iron skillet on a stovetop burner and let it get hot. ("Hot as frying an egg? Hotter. If you put an egg in this skillet, it'd jump back at you.") Place the grease in the skillet. When it starts to smoke, pour about 2 tablespoons of the melted grease into the batter, stir quickly to combine, then pour the batter into the skillet. As soon as a crust starts to form around the edge, place the skillet in the oven. Bake until golden brown on top, 12 to 15 minutes. Let cool for a few minutes before serving.

Several years after that, Jim Auchmutey, one of my colleagues at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, interviewed Foote about another subject close to his heart and deeply rooted in his heritage: cornbread. He told Jim he spent twice as long mastering that recipe as he did mastering the Civil War.

"You would think something so simple would be easy, but it isn't," Foote said. "I was raised on cornbread, and I've been making it all my life, but it wasn't until ten years ago that I found a recipe that pleased me. I like the top to be crunchy and as thin as newsprint; I'm very particular about it."

Foote went on to explain how Confederate soldiers would sustain themselves by mixing cornmeal with a little water, lard, and egg, molding the batter around their rifle ramrods, and cooking it over a campfire. "They called it sloosh," he said.

KATHY STARR: Soul Food in the Delta

The Soul of Southern Cooking by Kathy Starr is a classic, as much for the soul-food recipes rarely seen in cookbooks (including scrambled pork brains and boiled chicken feet) as for the author's poignant stories of growing up poor, but eating well, in the rural Delta.

Her first cooking lessons came as a child in the 1950s from her "grandmamma," Frances Fleming Hunter. Miz Bob, as she was known, opened a café in the 1930s called the Fair Deal. It was situated amid a string of cafés and juke joints called the Blue Front across the railroad tracks in the Washington County community of Hollandale, the only place blacks could gather on the weekends. Later she operated Miz Bob's café, until the Blue Front businesses began shutting down, and fast food took over in the 1960s.

Starr writes poignantly of her own memories of growing up in the Delta and living off the land:

> Blackberries and dewberries grew wild along the railroad track and alongside the bushes on the sides of the road. Berries were always known to grow in great numbers along "grudge" ditches. A late afternoon walk along the grudge ditch and railroad track was like a campout to all the kids, and picking berries was a joy. But, boy, do moccasins love grudge ditches! It's a wonder snakes didn't eat us alive.
>
> Black people believed that if ever a dragonfly—or "snake doctor," as we called it—was around, a snake was nearby as well. It was said that dragonflies were called "snake doctor" because snakes would eat them and be cured of whatever ailed them! As long as a snake doctor was around, you'd never find us picking

dewberries. But when we didn't see snake doctors, we'd pick dewberries to our heart's (and stomach's) content. Can't you just see us kids sticking our hands in the bushy weeds to pick dewberries, thinking we were safe because a snake doctor wasn't around? When I think about picking dewberries I am reminded of the saying "God watches over his children, and the angels of heaven protect them."

Dewberry Cobbler

The technique for making this cobbler, adapted from *The Soul of Southern Cooking*, is unconventional in several ways. The filling is first cooked on top of the stove without any thickener and then baked in a deep dish between sheets of pastry in two stages so that the middle layer of dough is baked just long enough to lose its raw taste. The result is a double-decker cobbler that is unabashedly messy and runny—and out-of-this-world delicious. Serve it warm, à la mode, in a big bowl with a spoon for scraping up every drop of juice.

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

Dough for a double-crust, deep-dish pie
2 pounds (8 cups) fresh or frozen dewberries or blackberries
2 cups sugar
6 ounces (1½ sticks) butter
¼ cup water, if needed
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
Vanilla ice cream, for serving (optional)

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Butter a 2½-quart baking dish.

Divide the dough in half and roll each piece to the size of the baking dish. Wrap each piece in plastic wrap and refrigerate until needed.

In a large saucepan, stir together the berries, sugar, and butter. If the berries are fresh, add the water. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves and the butter melts. Simmer until the berries collapse, about 20 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the vanilla. The mixture will be very thin with pieces of berry floating in it.

Spoon half of the berry mixture into the prepared baking dish. Top with one piece of the dough. Bake until the dough is very lightly browned, about 20 minutes.

Spoon the remaining filling into the dish. Top with the second piece of dough and press the edge lightly against the side of the dish to seal. Cut a few slits in the top. Bake until the crust is browned, about 30 minutes.

Let cool for at least 30 minutes before serving warm or at room temperature with the ice cream, if desired.

TAMALES AND . . . ZINFANDEL?

★ **Chillie's Package Store.** 2002 Highway 82 East. 662-335-1941 or 888-237-2847.

"What kind of wine goes with hot tamales?"

At Chillies Package Store, owners Sandy and Ricky DeAngelo field this question regularly. Often their customers are on their way to Doe's Eat Place, the famous steakhouse where homemade hot tamales are on the menu. But Doe's doesn't sell alcohol other than beer. Sandy DeAngelo is quick to suggest a Zinfandel—and a Cab for when the steak arrives.

Open since 1964, Chillie's boasts of one of the largest selections of wine and spirits in the state, and possibly the South. The store's success is partly based on the B.Y.O.B. policy that prevails at Doe's and so many of the Delta's best-loved restaurants that don't want to pay for a liquor license. Duck hunters also support the store heartily. Today the wine racks inside this 7,200-square-foot store hold 13,000 bottles.

A former barber, the affable DeAngelo and his brother opened Chillie's in 1964 in a smaller space with a fraction of that inventory. The name, he said, is a tribute to their father, Cesare "Chillie" DeAngelo. The DeAngelos sold mostly whiskey until "in 1976 I started dating a girl from Europe who helped me with wines," DeAngelo said. "I started buying and trying more wines and introducing them to our friends."

They have continued to broaden their palates with help from well-traveled friends and by getting involved in casino wine tastings and charitable functions at the Episcopal church.

Their clientele, they say, is a discerning bunch, and they are accustomed to filling special orders for harder-to-find wines. "All this wine and we don't have what they need," DeAngelo said, gesturing around his inventory with feigned exasperation. "Here it's a day and night, hands-on thing."

LELAND

Imagination Flows along Deer Creek

LELAND, a town of five thousand about twelve miles west of Greenville, proudly touts itself as the birthplace of Kermit the Frog. Muppets creator Jim Henson spent the better part of his boyhood here. While his agronomist father studied soybeans for the nearby USDA research center, Henson collected frogs and snakes and lizards along the mossy banks of Deer Creek, a tributary of the Yazoo River, which meanders through the fine old neighborhood where he lived.

Henson moved with his family to Maryland when he was twelve. But his memories of Deer Creek never left him. It was those creatures, hopping and slithering amid the Delta flora, that inspired the famous Muppets that took up residence on *Sesame Street*. He named the original character after classmate Kermit Scott, who sometimes played with him at the creek.

In 1991, the year after Henson died of pneumonia at the age of fifty-three, an exhibit opened in his honor, with Muppet memorabilia donated by the Jim Henson Company as "a gift to the people of Leland." This collection is displayed in a small rustic building that doubles as the town's Chamber of Commerce. Each year, 15,000 people come to see vintage *Sesame Street* toys, a diorama with an original Kermit sitting on a log with his banjo, and episodes of *Sesame Street* and Muppet movies in the video room.

Kermit has been good for tourism here. So have the bluesmen that called Leland home. The building downtown where James "Son" Thomas once worked as a porter is now the Highway 61 Blues Museum. Local artists have painted murals of those musicians on old buildings all over town. Each June, Leland hosts its own blues festival, and May brings a crawfish festival, with live bands and dancing.

For such a small town, Leland is a surprisingly rewarding place to eat anytime of year—with several sentimental favorites as well as interesting newcomers.

★ **Vince's.** 207 North Main Street. 662-686-2112.

Chef Will Gault resurrected a circa-1925 downtown restaurant serving updated Delta-inspired dishes like quail stuffed with andouille cornbread over turnip greens, and pan-seared duck breast with balsamic-port sauce over Mississippi-produced Grit Girl polenta. The original tiled walls and pressed-tin ceiling have been preserved, and the sexy speakeasy-style booths have been restored and equipped with chocolate-brown curtains. There's a martini bar and a small stage for live music that's heavy on blues.

★ **Cicero's.** 4857 Old Leland Road. 662-686-7000.

You know you're in a Delta restaurant when, instead of surf 'n' turf, the menu offers "cat 'n' cow." Such is the case at Cicero's, a longtime local haunt in Stoneville just west of Leland. If most of the items on the lengthy menu—fried dill pickles, catfish, steak, seafood platters, po-boys—seem typical of the area, the farming community that surrounds it is not. Many of the people who live and work here are scientists at Stoneville's USDA research center, a facility renowned for advancements in cotton ginning and aquaculture. Cicero's is where academics and field workers come for lunch or bring their families and friends for dinner. Other Deltans consider it a reliable bet as well.

Though Cicero's is only a few miles from Highway 61, the drive there quickly feels far from civilization, especially at night. You pass through a lovely old residential area along Deer Creek and veer left onto Old Leland Road, a bumpy blacktop with miles of farmland on either side. (The right fork leads to the Experiment Stations.) Within a few minutes, you spot the restaurant and the post office next to it—the only signs of life in sight.

In an aluminum building (the original structure burned in 1998) sturdily landscaped with shrubs and rocks, Cicero's is nonetheless homey and softly

lit inside, with framed posters of blues festivals and other local events on its butter-yellow walls.

Jimmy Cicero Walker and wife, Becky, opened Cicero's in the mid-1980s and built a loyal following. They later sold it to Texans Carl and Trula Moore, who with their son Ryan, continue the tradition of hospitality set by the Walkers. And they still feature Catfish Cicero—fillets encrusted in pecans, Parmesan, and herbed bread crumbs—the dish Becky Walker described as "catfish with a tuxedo on."

★ **Connie's Kitchen.** 111 Highway 82 East. 662-686-2255.

A sign near the entrance to Connie's Kitchen invites customers to "come and sit a spell." The wholesome, friendly atmosphere of this sweet-smelling little chocolate-brown frame building on the highway reiterates that message. Connie Koehn moved from Kansas to the Delta with her family in 1986 to join the growing Mennonite community that had begun settling here a few decades earlier. Six years later, with husband Eldon, she opened this combination bakery, café, and gift shop specializing in the baked goods for which her community is renowned. (More examples of Mennonite baking can be found at the Dutch Oven in Clarksdale.)

The tables are covered in gingham, the cinnamon rolls in the extensive bakery case are the size of salad plates, and the adjoining gift shop is

brimming with scented candles, spatterware pitchers, and other countrified kitchen tools and knickknacks.

Open for breakfast and lunch, Connie's makes all manner of yeasty breakfast rolls and doughnuts, as well as pumpkin breads, classic layer cakes like caramel and Italian cream, sugar cookies, chocolate pecan bars, and peanut butter–corn flake squares.

Wooden shelves are stacked with white and whole wheat breads and bags of butterhorn rolls. They also keep freezer cases stocked with homemade chicken casserole, cornbread dressing, and pizza bread for families to heat and eat.

Connie's Kitchen also takes care in preparing plate lunches that are purely southern. On the day I visited, the special was fried chicken, mashed potatoes, field peas with snap beans, turnip greens, and fruit salad.

★ Fratesi Grocery and Service Station. 1402 U.S. 82 East. 662-686-2253.

Locals still lament the loss of the original Fratesi's Grocery, a decrepit wood frame structure that had been a fixture along U.S. 82 since 1941. But owner Mark Fratesi maintains they had no choice but to tear it down, since it had become a fire hazard.

Yet even in its circa-1999 facility behind some Citgo gas pumps, Fratesi's Delta-centric personality remains intact. So does the lengthy selection of Italian- and Cajun-inspired deli offerings, including what may be the most delicious muffuletta to be found east of the Crescent City.

The kerosene pump to one side of the entrance and the wooden chest filled with minnows on the other don't immediately give the sense that foodies are the target audience here. Stands of rods and reels and boxes of bullets dominate the space. Tins of snuff gleam by the cash register, next to the Slim Jims. A small wild animal of some sort with a limp squirrel clenched between its teeth poses on a shelf near a watercolor of the original Fratesi's.

But there's also that glorious deli case, where the cold cuts include Genoa and Volpi salami, mortadella, prosciutto, and hog head souse. Delta gourmets also rely on Fratesi's for other hard-to-come-by ingredients like calamari, dry lupini beans, codfish, quail, and the freshwater prawns produced

locally by Steve Fratesi, a cousin. You can buy pork chops or deboned chicken as is or stuffed with jambalaya, spinach and cream cheese, or dirty rice. The pasta sauce they sell is made according to the recipe passed down from their Italian immigrant ancestors.

The Fratesis grind their own Italian sausage and, occasionally, one of their own sausage blends. On this day they're advertising Cajun sausage: a mixture of alligator meat, pork, and crawfish.

"That's somethin' I dreamed up—for better or for worse," Mark Fratesi said with a shrug. He runs the market with his two brothers; all three siblings farm cotton, soybeans, and corn. They inherited the store, and the farmland, from their father.

In the middle of the store are fast-food-style tables, where you can sit down for a basic hot breakfast, a plate lunch that changes daily, a cup of gumbo, or one of a dozen po-boy varieties. One combo is almost as odd as the Cajun sausage: fried olives, several cheeses, marinara sauce, and ranch dressing. But regulars swear it's addictively good.

Muffulettas are the other big favorite, and they are beauties: loaves of Italian bread smeared with mayonnaise and mustard and drippy with olive oil layered with multiple imported cold cuts, the requisite olive salad, kalamata olives, lettuce, and tomato.

The kitchen closes after lunch, but you can still get a sandwich to go. And if you happen to arrive after five p.m., you can witness Fratesi's transformation into "the East Leland Country Club," a rather fluid organization started by the Fratesi brothers' dad. Sure as sundown, the parking lot fills up with the mud-spattered trucks and SUVs of the members: a dozen or so farmers, who congregate outside and in the aisles to pop some cold ones and shoot the breeze.

★ **Lillo's.** 2001 Highway 82 East. 662-686-4401.

Delta natives everywhere tend to get misty-eyed at the mention of Lillo's. They love the spaghetti and meatballs, the manicotti, and the Old World, thin-crust "pizza pie." They love the "Italian salad" of iceberg lettuce with bits of olives and the optional anchovies swimming in lemony, garlicky dressing. And most of all, they love Thursday nights, when the aging jazz combo plays "Fly Me to the Moon" while couples—mostly seventy and over—dance cheek-to-cheek.

"A lot of the senior couples that come in tell us they had their first date at Lillo's or got engaged here," said Wesley Keen, one of the owners, whose

wife, Debbie, is the granddaughter of the founders. In its early days, it was called Lillo's Supper Club and couples waltzed and jitterbugged on the Dim Lit Dance Floor.

Lillo's has been a Leland landmark along Highway 82 since Jimmy and Conchetta Lillo opened the restaurant in 1948. With black shutters and a thick hedge of boxwoods lining its walkway, this simple white clapboard building probably looks much as it did when it was an American Legion Hall. A nine-room motel adjoins the building.

Lillo's is now more of a family restaurant than a nightclub, with dancing only on Thursdays, when Lillo's Band plays, as it has for more than twenty years. But they have live music other nights: a keyboardist crooning 1950s hits on Wednesdays and a band called Jazz Persuasion playing easy listening tunes on Sundays. Younger generations are drawn to the unapologetically outdated atmosphere: the latticework hung with plastic grapes; the family photos and high school class portraits on the wall; the cherry-red wooden booths.

Keen, who runs the restaurant with his brother-in-law, Charles Lillo, and other family members, says the menu specialties are still prepared

according to recipes Jimmy and Conchetta Lillo used. Besides pizza and red-sauce pasta dishes, favorites include eggplant Parmesan, shrimp in lemon-butter sauce, and catfish prepared with an Italian twist.

They also claim bragging rights to the original recipe for the "Labella burger," the "floating hamburger" made famous decades ago by an Indianola restaurant that served the concoction through train windows to passengers. The giant burger, sans top bun, sits in a pool of spicy homemade chili, and is topped with slaw. While other restaurants throughout the Delta serve their own versions, only Lillo's is the true "Labella burger." The reason: Debbie Keen and Charles Lillo's mother, Josephine, is the daughter of Charlie and Minnie Labella, who ran that Indianola restaurant.

They keep the recipe top secret but sell a mix for the chili seasoning, along with other Lillo's packaged products, such as spaghetti sauce and salad dressing.

LAUREN FARMS PRAWNS

★ **Lauren Farms Prawns.** www.laurenfarms.com

Over two weekends each fall, seafood lovers load their trunks with ice-filled coolers and follow the homemade "Shrimp" signs to Lauren Farms, on the outskirts of Leland, far from the nearest beach. At the end of a winding country road, past silver grain bins and country churches, are several former catfish ponds that now serve as prawn hatcheries.

Steve and Dolores Fratesi, pioneers in the area's freshwater prawn industry, live in a nearby white clapboard farmhouse. They sell frozen prawns year-round, mostly online and in small groceries around the Delta. But you can get them fresh from the pond in late September, when the Fratesis invite the public to their farm to learn more about what they are bringing home to eat. Steve and his wife started the tradition several years ago at the suggestion of daughter Anne-Lauren, who helps with the marketing and for whom the business was named. The Lauren Farms Pond Sale has become a Mississippi fall ritual among food lovers. Regulars know to get there early or reserve orders ahead; the prawns always sell out.

Similar to shrimp, but with long legs attached to menacing pincers, prawns have a sweet, mild taste and lobster-like texture that chefs are just beginning to appreciate. In restaurants from the middle of Mississippi to the California coast, Delta-grown prawns have been blackened and tucked

into po-boys, sautéed and served over grits, tossed in salads and pasta, marinated in ceviche, and rolled into sushi.

The Fratesis are not only farmers but crusaders, with a mission that extends well beyond their own business interests. They're out to boost the agricultural prospects of the entire region by showing catfish farmers whose business has shrunk in recent years another way to keep their ponds productive.

Steve Fratesi comes from a long line of Delta farmers who raised mainly soybeans, rice, and wheat. He and Dolores met in college, where both earned accounting degrees. "We dated forever," said Dolores. "Steve worked in Memphis for two years and I was in Greenville. I could have been a Germantown wife playing tennis, but one of the things he missed was plowing the fields in the late evening and smelling the newly turned earth."

They moved to the Leland area to farm, quickly realizing just how critical diversification would be, as rising production costs and volatile prices made it increasingly difficult to turn a profit on traditional crops. Steve converted much of the clay-rich soil into environmentally controlled catfish ponds.

The Fratesis still raise catfish, but that industry has taken a serious downturn in recent years, with rising transportation and feed costs and cheaper catfish products from China roiling the market. Many Delta catfish farmers have filled in their ponds and replaced them with corn and soybeans, or closed their farms altogether.

But the Fratesis already had a backup plan in place.

Mississippi State University in the late 1980s started a program to encourage Delta farmers to give prawns a try, and the Fratesis were among the first to sign up. "We were fascinated with the idea of growing shrimp in our backyard," Dolores said.

After years of research, they founded Lauren Farms in 1995 on fourteen acres of dormant catfish ponds and have since mastered the full cycle of production, from hatching to harvesting to marketing. While Steve runs the ponds and hosts seminars for other farmers, Dolores visits restaurants and grocery stores, often conducting cooking demonstrations, to make a case for investing in the product.

Natives of Malaysia, these prawns traditionally begin life in the ocean then swim upriver into tidal basins to spawn and hatch. The Fratesis

re-create that saltwater environment, hatching the eggs in special tanks before they're transferred to the freshwater ponds, where the hatchlings continue to grow, without synthetic chemicals, in an environment resistant to disease and erosion. The couple's sustainable farming practices have earned them national recognition and a green "Best Choice" designation from the Seafood Watch program sponsored by the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Dolores is constantly experimenting with new ways to cook prawns, often with assistance from area chefs, who have embraced them on their menus. Prawns can be substituted in any recipe that calls for shrimp, but because they lack the brininess of their saltwater kin, Dolores tends to go a bit heavier on the seasonings.

Prawns Wrapped in Prosciutto

This simple, festive preparation goes well over pasta tossed in pesto sauce. The Fratesis luckily have a convenient supply of Italian specialty items like prosciutto, which are available at Steve's cousins' market, Fratesi's, also in Leland. Deltans love their garlic, which explains the generous amount in this recipe, but feel free to adjust the amount to suit your taste.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

4 ounces very thinly sliced prosciutto
2 pounds large freshwater prawns or jumbo shrimp, peeled and deveined
¼ pound (1 stick) butter, divided
½ cup olive oil, divided
Juice of 4 lemons (about ½ cup)
¼ cup minced garlic
¼ cup minced fresh parsley
¼ cup minced oil-packed Kalamata olives
Freshly cooked pasta (either plain or tossed with pesto), for serving

Cut the slices of prosciutto lengthwise into thin strips to total one strip for each prawn. Wrap one strip around the center of each prawn. In a large, deep skillet, heat 4 tablespoons of the butter and ¼ cup of the oil over medium-high heat. Cook the prosciutto-wrapped prawns on both sides until they turn a nice bright pink. (Be sure not to overcook the prawns or they will be tough.) Line up the prawns on a serving platter, leaving the drippings in the skillet.

Stir the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter and ¼ cup of oil into the drippings. Add the lemon juice, garlic, parsley, and olives. Season with salt and pepper. Cook until the liquid reduces a little. Dribble the sauce over the prawns. Serve warm over plain or pesto-seasoned pasta.

SELECT
PECANS
5 LBS. NET

SUNFLOWER COUNTY

Homegrown Legends

SUNFLOWER COUNTY is the longest county in Mississippi, a narrow, fifty-six-mile swath of flatland as deep into the Delta as you can go. Drive it top to bottom and you can view every archetypal snapshot of the region from your car window. Cotton, corn, soybeans, rice, and catfish all grow in abundance. Flocks of waterfowl fly over the Sunflower River. Rickety old railroad tracks, both traveled and long-abandoned, connect active communities to what amount to ghost towns.

Big names sprang from these small towns. Blues master B. B. King, football superstar Archie Manning, and culinary icon Craig Claiborne all have childhood ties to Sunflower County. In Ruleville, the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden honors the outspoken civil rights leader and native daughter with a grave marker inscribed with her most famous line: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

The seeds of Delta blues took root and flourished here. Dockery Plantation, between Cleveland and Ruleville, attracts blues fans who come to feel the ghosts of Charley Patton, Howlin' Wolf, and other greats who chopped cotton and made music on its ten thousand acres of cotton fields. At the northern end of the county is Mississippi State Penitentiary

at Parchman, where chain-gang chants gave rise to the sounds that would define the region. A Blues Trail marker across from the gates now awaits photo ops. It acknowledges the works of former inmates, including R. L. Burnside and Booker "Bukka" White, who recorded "Parchman Prison Blues" and gave his cousin, B. B. King, his first guitar.

Riley B. King was born September 16, 1925, near Itta Bena in Leflore County. After the death of his mother, he eventually came to live with his father in Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County. As a teenager, he chopped cotton and drove a tractor before hitchhiking to Memphis, where he changed his name to B. B. for "Beale Street Blues Boy." Yet the Blues Hall of Famer and multi–Grammy Award winner has remained a tireless booster for Indianola, as well as the entire Delta. At least once a year for three decades, King has returned to the town to perform a benefit concert. In 2008, that homecoming celebration included the unveiling of the twenty-thousand-square-foot, $14 million B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center.

Indeed, the blues legend's presence in Indianola is inescapable. His image is plastered on billboards and cast in bronze in a park that bears his name. He looks down from a huge mural painted on the side of a downtown building. His footprints and handprints are impressed in a sidewalk. A Blues Trail marker commemorates the street corner where he performed in his youth for pocket change.

And just as the museum has immortalized Indianola's history and music heritage, the area's eateries are doing their part to preserve its foodways. You can eat and drink well, in settings that won't let you forget where you are—especially if take you take your time getting there.

★ **Club Ebony.** 404 Hanna Street. 662-887-2264; 662-887-9915.

Long before Indianola had the B. B. King Museum, it had Club Ebony. Shaded by old oaks in a residential neighborhood, this simple A-frame building has been a magnet for musicians and blues disciples since 1945. A Blues Trail marker standing beside the massive barbecue smoker in front ticks off an impressive list of celebrities who have graced its stage: Ray Charles, Count Basie, James Brown, Denise LaSalle, Ike Turner. B. B. King is not only an occasional performer; he bought the place in 2008 in a bid to ensure its legacy. King had countless times performed at Club Ebony—part of the network of black clubs known as the "chitlin circuit"—over the years.

Call ahead to see if there's live music in the offing (performances are sporadic), but in any case you can order food Thursday through Saturday nights. Locals rave about the deep-fried pork chops. Or you can just grab a beer or a cocktail at the bar—otherwise known as the "Well of Perfection"—and bask in the vibe.

★ **Pea-Soup's Lott-A-Freeze (aka Pea Soup Lott's).** 809 Highway 82 West. 662-887-1544.

"Pea Soup" was the nickname a local high school football coach gave Emmett Lott to describe his less-than-swift moves on the field. When Lott grew up and opened a drive-in burger joint with wife Connie in 1968, he proudly incorporated that moniker in the name. Now run by Lott's son and daughter-in-law, Thomas and Brenda, Pea-Soup's is no longer a drive-in but a small sit-down restaurant with two walk-up windows.

ASCO
Nutrition Facts

The straightforward menu, however, remains much the same. It is still the place to go for a platter-sized "floating" chili burger (a local oddity sometimes known as the Labella burger for the Indianola restaurant that made them famous), an oyster po-boy, fried catfish and seafood, and hot tamales. Ice cream is the soft-serve variety, and they still make old-time sundaes and malts.

The Lotts take special pride in their fried butterflied shrimp, which earned them a *Delta Magazine* Readers' Choice Award a few years back. The salads are slathered in a garlicky ranch salad dressing they make according to their own recipe. Black-and-white photos of Indianola High School's sports teams line the walls, reinforcing the nostalgia and the local flavor.

★ The Blue Biscuit. 501 Second Street. 662-645-0258. www.thebluebiscuit.com

Across the street from the B. B. King Museum stands a little brick building that's been a butcher shop, a car dealership, a glass company, and a church.

Nowadays, it's the Blue Biscuit, a blues club and restaurant where Trish Berry preaches the gospel of good food and good times—on weekends, for private events, and whenever else the spirit moves her. In the daytime, she runs the kitchen at the Indianola Pecan House; in earlier years she helped actor Morgan Freeman and attorney Bill Luckett craft menus for their two Clarksdale ventures, Madidi restaurant and Ground Zero Blues Club.

For the first few years after she and husband Stan bought the Biscuit, she would send out a mass e-mail to friends as if she were having an impromptu dinner party—sort of like a flash rave—and let them know what she was cooking. Word of the parties spread, and regulars now come for her renowned barbecue and "redneck fish fries," as well as the chicken and dumplings, sausage-stuffed pork chops, fried green tomatoes, and catfish every way imaginable. Desserts, the more decadent the better, are also a specialty; her version of Mississippi Mud Pie features Kahlúa-spiked coffee ice cream packed into an Oreo crust and served atop a pool of homemade caramel sauce.

Berry wears another hat at the Biscuit—innkeeper. Next door is a canary-yellow tin-roofed bungalow moved from an old plantation. She renovated it, decorated it with family antiques, and rents it out as a B and B.

Trish's Mississippi Mud Pie

Trish Berry calls this "one of my most favorite things to eat in the entire world, and my boys' too. I used to do a ton of rehearsal dinners here at the house and that was one of the most popular desserts. I'd make big sheet pans of it. As one would start to get too soft, I'd put it back in the freezer and take out another one. That would leave several pans half-full of Mud Pie in the freezer. The next morning, in front of the TV, my children and their friends would watch cartoons with at least one of the pans in their laps chowing down."

To make in a sheet pan or a 9-by-13-inch pan, double the ingredients.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

20 Oreo cookies (no substitutes)
4 tablespoons butter (½ stick), cut into small cubes, at room temperature
½ gallon coffee ice cream (homemade or high-quality store-bought)
2 tablespoons Kahlúa or other coffee-flavored liqueur
Caramel Sauce, for serving (recipe follows)
Whipped cream, for garnish (optional)

For the crust: In the bowl of a food processor, combine the Oreos and butter. Pulse, scraping down the side of the bowl when necessary, until the butter is completely incorporated and mixture sticks together when squeezed. The mixture should be crumbly, not pasty. Pour into a 9-inch pie pan and press evenly over the bottom and up the sides to form a pie shell. Cover and freeze until firm.

For the filling: Let the ice cream soften enough that it can be stirred. Scrape it into a large bowl and stir in the Kahlúa. Scoop into the pie shell; cover with foil and freeze until the ice cream is firm.

To serve, spoon some of the Caramel Sauce onto each serving plate. Cut the pie into in wedges and place a wedge atop each pool of sauce. Garnish with whipped cream, if using. Drizzle with more caramel sauce, if desired, or serve the rest of the sauce on the side.

CARAMEL SAUCE

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

1½ cups heavy cream
1½ cups sugar
⅓ cup water
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

In a small saucepan, heat the cream over medium heat until it begins to bubble around the edge. Remove the pan from the heat and set it aside.

In a medium, heavy saucepan, combine the sugar and water. Cook over medium-high heat, without stirring, until the sugar dissolves, about 5 minutes. Use a pastry brush dipped in cold water to brush away any sugar crystals that begin to form around the edge of the pan. Continue cooking, gently swirling the pan occasionally, until the sugar turns medium golden brown, 7 to 10 minutes. Immediately remove the pan from the heat and slowly pour in the reserved cream. Return the pan to the heat, bring to a simmer, and cook, stirring, until the sauce is smooth and thick, about 2 minutes. Stir in the vanilla. Serve warm or at room temperature. If making ahead, cover and refrigerate until ready to use; gently reheat or return to room temperature before serving.

★ **The Crown Restaurant / Taste of Gourmet.** 112 Front Street. 662-887-4522; 800-722-8931.

The proprietors of the Crown Restaurant in Indianola's quaint downtown make a point of telling customers they do not serve fried catfish. Poached and flaked in a salad; gratinéed with scallions and Parmesan cheese; smoked and pureed into a pâté—but not fried.

This is catfish for the ladies-who-lunch bunch, served in a charming family-run café and gift shop that specializes in regionally themed books, classic children's toys, local crafts, and a smattering of imported British antiques. The Crown draws its share of business people, but its biggest fans are the bevies who meet here regularly for those fancified catfish dishes, the quiches, the prettily garnished salads and sandwiches, and the decadent desserts.

It's hard to imagine a more gracious southern lady than its creative force, Evelyn Roughton, or a savvier entrepreneur of all things Delta. With her honeyed drawl, she invites customers to sample her luxurious smoked catfish pâtés, displayed on an antique table with crackers for dipping. Those award-winning spreads, sold in her shop and by mail, have been featured in more magazines, newspapers, and television shows than she can count.

As a young bride, Roughton traveled the world with husband Tony while he was in the air force, and she became fascinated with European antiques and foreign cuisines. When they returned to her native Indianola in the early 1970s, they opened the Antique Mall, where they sold European imported furniture in the middle of a cotton field a few miles from downtown.

As an incentive to bring people to the country to shop, they added the Crown Tea Room, serving pub-style lunches and afternoon tea. Roughton's cooking reputation grew along with the Delta's farm-raised-catfish industry. After she created a wedding reception menu in the 1980s using several elegant iterations of catfish, the accolades really started rolling in. A mail order business and cookbook, *Classic Catfish*, followed. They have expanded their line to include mixes for their popular desserts—such as plantation and lemon pies—as well as dips and cheese balls. Along with the southern classics, they also serve an English trifle and Austrian pavlova, a meringue shell filled with whipped cream, apricots, and nuts.

Of all their catfish dishes, Catfish Allison, passed on to Roughton by a friend, is the hands-down favorite of her most faithful customers.

The Crown's Catfish Allison

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

4 ounces freshly grated Parmesan cheese (1 cup)
¼ pound (1 stick) unsalted butter or margarine, at room temperature
6 tablespoons mayonnaise
6 green onions, finely chopped
½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
Generous dash of Tabasco sauce
6 to 8 catfish fillets (6 to 8 ounces each)

For the butter: In a small bowl, stir together the cheese, butter, mayonnaise, onion, Worcestershire, and Tabasco. Set aside or cover and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. Let the butter return to room temperature before using.

For the fish: Fill a wide, deep skillet with several inches of water. Bring the water to a simmer over medium heat. Arrange the fillets in a single layer in the water. Return the water to a gentle simmer and poach the fillets until they are opaque throughout and firm to the touch, 4 to 5 minutes. Use a slotted spatula to gently lift the fillets from the water and set aside to drain on a plate lined with paper towels.

Broil and assemble: Preheat the broiler. Arrange the fillets in a single layer in a lightly greased baking dish or divide them among lightly greased individual gratin dishes.

Spread 2 tablespoons of the butter mixture over each fillet. Broil until the tops are brown, 2 to 3 minutes. If the fillets are in a baking dish, carefully transfer them onto serving plates and spoon some of the pan juices over each serving. Serve hot.

KOOL-AID PICKLES

★ **THE GIANT PLASTIC JUGS** perched on convenience store counters all over the Delta are unlabeled, but everyone knows what those shadowy cylinders bobbing inside are.

They're Kool-Aid pickles—or "Koolickles," as some people call them. And they are just what the name implies: jumbo dills, marinated in dry powdered drink mix, sugar, and the juice in the pickle jar long enough to turn them into mutant hues not found on any color wheel. They're so popular some stores can barely keep them in stock.

Kool-Aid pickles are nothing new around here; for decades, kids from poor black neighborhoods have been pouring packets of Kool-Aid directly into pickle jars to produce a tangy snack. Apparently some grocer took notice, refined the technique a bit, and started selling them along with other pickled soul-food standbys like eggs and pigs' feet.

Then, a few years back, southern food and culture writer John T. Edge wrote a piece about them for the *New York Times*. The article went viral on the Internet, and before long Kraft, parent company of Kool-Aid—which until then had been unaware of this dilly of a product usage—had a recipe on its website.

There is no consensus on the best way to make a Kool-Aid pickle; the Kraft company's version calls for draining the pickles, then mixing the Kool-Aid and sugar with water, as usual, for the soaking liquid; others advise using the pickle juice as the liquid. The pickles may be soaked whole, cut in half, or pricked with holes to hasten marination. Most advise brining at least a week in the refrigerator before eating.

Kool-Aid Pickles

MAKES ONE 46-OUNCE JAR

1 (46-ounce) jar whole dill pickles (about 16 large pickles)
2½ cups water, or reserved pickle juice and enough water to total 2½ cups
1 cup sugar
2 packets Kool-Aid, preferably a "red" flavor such as cherry or strawberry

Drain the juice from the pickles and, if using, reserve it. Remove the pickles from the jar and cut each one in half lengthwise or prick them all over with a fork. Return the pickles to the jar.

Pour the water into a large measuring cup. (If using the pickle juice, pour it into the measuring cup and add enough water to make 2½ cups.) Add the sugar and Kool-Aid and stir until the sugar dissolves. Pour enough of the liquid into the pickle jar to cover the pickles. Discard any excess. Cover the jar and refrigerate at least 24 hours. These keep for several months.

★ **Lost Pizza Company.** 807 Highway 82 West. 662-887-1555. www.LostPizza.com

Preston Lott and his buddy Brooks Roberts knew their community was hungry for pizza but not the chain variety. Barely out of college, they crafted a pie with a decidedly Delta flavor, using the crust-making technique they had studied in Chicago. They procured high-quality meats and cheeses and fine-tuned their creative sauces and toppings at Preston's parents' restaurant, Pea-Soup's Lott-A-Freeze, next door.

Images of Elvis, B. B. King, and Bob Marley stenciled on large wooden planks adorn the walls. At the top of a lengthy list of signature pizzas is "The Lucille," named for B. B. King's guitar. It features grilled chicken, bacon, roasted garlic, and fresh tomatoes, with a drizzle of homemade ranch dressing (courtesy of Pea-Soup's). "The Pit Boss," topped with pulled pork and sautéed onions, is the guys' take on Memphis barbecue pizza. In honor of the reggae king, they do a variety of wings, regular and boneless, that include Jamaican jerk along with barbecue.

There are Lost Pizza locations in Cleveland and Tupelo as well.

★ **Nola.** 108 Court Avenue. 662-887-2990.

Vintage movie posters hang on the brick walls of Nola, a contemporary-casual restaurant across from the Sunflower County Courthouse. That's appropriate, since for forty years it was the Regent movie theater. With cement floors and exposed-beam ceilings, the cavernous space exudes a high-energy vibe at both lunch and dinner. Chef-owner Chuck McCarty is an adventurous cook who clearly knows his customers' tastes. Catfish sliders, fried green tomato BLTs, and clever soups like cheeseburger chowder served with "Mae Rine's buttermilk or jalapeno cornbread" have been big hits. At night you can step it up with a steak kebab or grilled tuna steak topped with crawfish tails and vegetables in lemon-garlic butter sauce. White chocolate bread pudding and other killer desserts are courtesy of Chuck's wife, Marcia.

★ **The Gin Mill Galleries Restaurant.** 109 Pershing Avenue. 662-887-3209.

In 2006, a tornado destroyed the rusty old Fletcher-Barnett cotton gin, where B. B. King once worked. But local craftsman Tom Bingham rebuilt it, using salvaged original tin and wood. Located next to the B. B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, the Gin Mill houses a café and bar and an art gallery with a gift shop, where Bingham sells his hand-crafted

furniture and artwork. The menu is simple, mostly salads and sandwiches like pimento cheese and fried bologna. Bingham also makes tamales from scratch. On weekends, he throws steaks and salmon fillets on the fancy grill outside. The Cool Moon is the dessert specialty, and he's more than happy to share the recipe: Set 1 Moon Pie in a dish and heat in a microwave for 1 minute. Top with 2 scoops vanilla bean ice cream. Eat immediately.

DRESSING A SALAD, DELTA-STYLE

★ **DELTANS TEND TO BE PICKY** about their salad dressing. Most independent eateries pride themselves on the ones they make from scratch. Even the ever-popular ranch is often freshly made. Vinaigrettes usually have an Italian accent—heavy on the garlic and often with fresh lemon juice.

The salad menu standby is Comeback (sometimes spelled Kumback) dressing. Though said to have been in invented in Jackson, Mississippi, at the Rotisserie Restaurant, this creamy sauce—akin to a spicy Thousand Island dressing—turns up everywhere in the Delta, as a dip for raw vegetables or fried dill pickles or as a salad dressing. In Vicksburg, it's called Nosser Sauce, named after a restaurateur who came up with a popular version.

Sis Manning's Kumback Dressing (or Sauce)

Just about every Delta community cookbook offers a variation of this popular salad dressing, and this one, from the mother of football legend Archie Manning, is an excellent example. It's slightly adapted from one she contributed to *Pick of the Crop*.

MAKES 1¾ CUPS

¼ cup chili sauce
¼ cup ketchup
4 to 5 tablespoons onion juice from 1 small onion (see note)
¼ cup vegetable oil
1 tablespoon water
1½ teaspoons yellow mustard
1½ teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
1 garlic clove, minced
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
Pinch of paprika
Dash of Tabasco sauce
½ cup mayonnaise
Salt, to taste (optional)

In a medium bowl, combine the chili sauce, ketchup, onion juice, vegetable oil, water, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, garlic, pepper, paprika, and Tabasco. Whisk in the mayonnaise. Taste for salt. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 1 week.

Note: To juice an onion, peel it and cut it in half. Grate it on the smallest holes of a box grater or puree it in a blender or food processor. Strain the pulp through a sieve lined with several layers of cheesecloth or a coffee filter, squeezing the pulp to extract all of the juice.

OTHER HOMEGROWN GIFTS

★ **Indianola Pecan House.** 103 Highway 82 East. 662-887-5420; 1-800-541-6252. pecanhouse.com

Fresh pecans—grown in and around the Delta—are naturally the big attraction at this sprawling, rustic-looking store. Spiced and candied nuts, a staple of every Delta cocktail party, come in such varieties as Southern Comfort, sea salt, rosemary, and chocolate toffee. The Indianola Pecan House is a gift shop, too, so you'll also find nutless southern-flavored items like cheese straws and smoked ham.

Run by Tim Timbs and his family for more than thirty years, the Pecan House now has multiple locations throughout the state and a booming mail-order business. Its products are also featured in local restaurants.

CARAMEL ICING

★ **The Caramel Factory.** 662-745-8050. www.caramelfactory.com

Deltans are crazy for caramel cake. In her book, *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*, Tchula native Martha Foose calls caramel layer cake "the worsted-wool suit of cakes: it is appropriate for any and all occasions."

But even the region's most enthusiastic cooks don't bake them like they used to. The icing is time-consuming, messy, and notoriously temperamental. But during her more than twenty years as a caterer, Wanda Belk of Drew got the technique down to a science. Recognizing the potential for expanding her clientele of harried hostesses, Belk and a business partner devised a way to produce the icing to sell in individual plastic tubs. In 1996, the home shopping network QVC came to Mississippi looking for locally made products to feature and selected Belk's caramel icing. The Caramel Factory has since become a thriving cottage industry, with the product sold in regional gift stores and over the Internet.

Made of margarine, buttermilk, caramelized sugar, marshmallows, light corn syrup, and baking soda, it re-creates the flavor Delta families know and love—with a shelf life of six months. Sold in 22-ounce containers—enough to frost a typical three-layer cake—it's ready to spread after a minute or two in the microwave. The creators caution against overheating it; like the scratch versions, it will become too hard to spread. Should this happen, though, they add, don't despair: "Just add a little vanilla and some pecans and drop onto waxed paper for delicious pralines."

Sunflower County Caramel Cake

Mastering the art of caramel icing is a hallmark of a top-notch Delta baker. If you are ambitious and want to take a shot at making the traditional cake—which features a cooked icing that is more like a smooth, thick glaze than fluffy frosting—from scratch, here's a good one adapted from the Drew Academy PTA's *Pick of the Crop* cookbook. Don't attempt this on a rainy day, as the temperamental icing might not set in high humidity.

MAKES ONE 3-LAYER CAKE

CAKE

3 cups cake flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
2 cups sugar
4 large eggs, at room temperature
1 cup milk
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

ICING

⅔ cup evaporated milk
1 cup milk
¼ pound (1 stick) unsalted butter
3½ cups sugar, divided
⅛ teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

For the cake: Preheat the oven to 375°F. Grease three 9-inch round cake pans and line the bottoms with rounds of waxed paper or parchment paper.

Into a large bowl, sift together the flour, baking powder, and salt. In another large bowl, beat the butter and sugar with an electric mixer set to high speed until the mixture is light and fluffy. With the mixer on medium speed, add the eggs, one at a time, beating until each egg is thoroughly incorporated. Scrape down the sides of the bowl.

Reduce the mixer speed to low. Alternately add one-third of the flour mixture with half of the milk, mixing each time only until the batter is smooth. Stir in the vanilla. Scrape down the sides of the bowl, then increase the speed to medium and beat just until smooth.

Fill each prepared pan about three-quarters full of batter. Bake until a cake tester inserted into the center comes out with a moist crumb, about 20 minutes. Cool the layers in their pans on wire racks for 20 minutes. Turn the layers out of the pans onto the racks and let cool to room temperature.

For the icing: In a large saucepan, stir together the evaporated milk, milk, butter, and 1¾ cups of the sugar; cook over low heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Keep warm over low heat.

In a medium cast-iron skillet, cook the remaining 1¾ cups of the sugar over medium heat without stirring until it begins to melt. Gently swirl the skillet until all of the sugar melts and turns pale amber. Immediately pour the caramelized sugar into the warm milk mixture. Add the baking soda.

Increase the heat to medium-high and stir to dissolve the caramelized sugar. Bring to a boil and cook, stirring, until the mixture reaches 238°F degrees (soft-ball stage) on a candy thermometer. Remove the pan from the heat. Stir in the vanilla. Let the mixture cool until it is no longer bubbling. Carefully pour the mixture into a large bowl and beat with an electric mixer set to high speed until the icing thickens to spreading consistency and loses its gloss. (This takes several minutes and the length of time this step takes can vary greatly. Keep a close eye on the icing and don't lose heart.) Working quickly, immediately ice the top of each layer, stacking them as you go, and then ice the sides of the cake. (If the icing begins to turn too hard to spread, set the saucepan in a bowl of warm water and stir the icing until it loosens.)

Store the cake at room temperature, lightly covered with nonstick foil or another wrap that will not stick to the frosting, for up to 2 days.

CRAIG CLAIBORNE: FROM MISS KATHLEEN'S BOARDING HOUSE TO TOP OF THE FOOD WORLD

★ **RAYMOND CRAIG CLAIBORNE** was born into wealth in the tiny town of Sunflower in 1920. When the family went broke during the Depression, they moved to Indianola, where his father took an accounting job and his mother opened a boarding house. Painfully shy, and clumsy at sports, Claiborne found refuge in "Miss Kathleen's" kitchen and dining room, where refined dishes such as shrimp rémoulade and coconut cake appeared on the oval walnut table along with the more commonplace fried chicken, field peas, and sweet potato pie.

There he developed a lifetime love for good food that would put him in the ranks with Julia Child and James Beard as one of the most influential American food writers of the twentieth century. Claiborne briefly attended Mississippi State then got his journalism degree at the University of Missouri. During World War II he joined the navy and learned the joys of couscous and coq au vin while stationed at posts abroad. Later he earned a certificate in classical French cuisine from the Professional School of the Swiss Hotel Keepers' Association in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Claiborne landed a job as a receptionist at *Gourmet* magazine, then, in 1957, became the food editor at the *New York Times*, where he would spend the next three decades traveling the world, tasting, and translating his discoveries into meticulously tested recipes that ran in countless columns and more than twenty cookbooks.

Yet, even with a world-circling culinary repertoire, whenever he was asked to name his favorite dish of all time, his answer was always the same: his mother's chicken spaghetti—the dish for which Kathleen Claiborne became famous "up and down the Delta." That recipe was published in his 1987 classic collection *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking*, along with many other recipes that originated in the kitchen of his mother's boarding house. Today, countless incarnations of the homey casserole appear in every spiral-bound cookbook in the region and frequently turn up on Delta restaurant menus and in take-out freezer cases. Most contain a slew of convenience foods. Not Kathleen Claiborne's original, which calls for fresh mushrooms, homemade béchamel and bolognese sauces, and most importantly, the aromatic "holy trinity" of onions, celery, and bell pepper that is the hallmark of fine Cajun-Creole cooks just down the river.

Chicken spaghetti is time-consuming and laborious, but well worth trying—without any shortcuts—at least once. The recipe's easy enough to download from the Internet and virtually impossible to improve upon, and so I am paying tribute to Claiborne instead with a lesser-known recipe from his past.

His mother's ethereal hot cakes recipe is a treasure equal to chicken spaghetti but simpler to make. The method is a bit unusual: You first make a cornmeal mush, add traditional pancake ingredients, and fold whipped egg whites into the batter just before frying. The recipe appeared in a 1980 Sunday food column he wrote with his French chef sidekick Pierre Franey and again in the 2010 tome *The Essential New York Times Cookbook: Classic Recipes for a New Century*, slightly fine-tuned by Amanda Hesser.

I have added a few tweaks and paired it with a fresh orange syrup inspired by another Kathleen Claiborne recipe. Though she used it to glaze a date- and pecan-studded tube cake, it also works wonderfully as a pancake syrup.

Kathleen Claiborne's Hot Cakes with Orange Syrup

MAKES 18 TO 20 PANCAKES

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
½ cup cornmeal
1 tablespoon sugar
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup boiling water
2 large eggs, separated
1 cup whole milk
¼ cup vegetable oil, plus more for greasing the pan
Orange Syrup (recipe follows) or your favorite maple syrup, honey, jams, jellies, or preserves

Preheat oven to 175°F. Sift together the flour and baking powder; set aside. In a small saucepan, combine the cornmeal, sugar, and salt. Slowly pour boiling water over the mixture, whisking constantly until smooth. Cook and stir over medium heat, 1 or 2 minutes. Scrape the mixture into a large mixing bowl and let cool for a few minutes, whisking occasionally. Whisk in the egg yolks.

Stir the flour and baking powder mixture into the batter. Add the milk and ¼ cup oil and whisk until smooth. Beat the egg whites with an electric mixer until stiff and fold them into the batter with a soft rubber spatula.

Heat a heavy skillet over medium heat until a drop of water sizzles, then swirl with a little oil to coat. Pour a scant ¼ cup of batter for each pancake onto the hot skillet; cook until bubbles appear on the surface. Flip and cook until golden brown on both sides, about 2 minutes per batch. Continue until all the batter is used, adding more oil as needed. Transfer to a heatproof platter; cover with waxed paper and keep warm in oven until all pancakes are cooked. Serve with Orange Syrup or other toppings.

ORANGE SYRUP

The orange cake recipe this was originally used for called for poking holes in the top of the tube cake with a metal skewer and pouring syrup over all, allowing the syrup to permeate the cake. This is a great way to dress up any simple pound cake.

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

1½ cups freshly squeezed orange juice
1 cup sugar
1 tablespoon grated orange rind

In a small saucepan, combine the orange juice, sugar, and orange rind. Bring to a simmer, stirring until sugar is dissolved. Continue to cook until syrup reaches desired consistency, 30 minutes to an hour (you only need to simmer a few minutes if using for a cake glaze). Remove from heat; let cool slightly and serve over hot cakes. Store leftover syrup in the refrigerator; rewarm in the microwave.

BAYOU CUISINE

★ **CYPRESS-STUDDED,** primordial-looking streams called bayous (pronounced BAH-YOES as opposed to BI-YOOS) thread the Delta landscape. Indian Bayou is one of the more iconic ones. It meanders incongruously through modern subdivisions and Indianola's downtown business district, where an antiquated bank clock stands not far away from an ancient Choctaw mound. Each holiday season, the bayou is decorated with Christmas lights and floats for a community parade.

A color photograph of Indian Bayou graces the cover of *Bayou Cuisine*, a spiral-bound cookbook first published in 1970 by Indianola's St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and a Delta classic to this day. *Bayou Cuisine* is not your typical collection of homespun recipes. The chapters encompass history and geography lessons and insights into Delta culture, written from the perspective of its blue bloods.

The foreword exults, "The heritage of the local habitants is of indestructible Anglo-Saxon stock, with a trace of French and Spanish. The people are much like New Englanders or old Europeans in strength of family ties, gentility, and innate politeness. . . . The art of good cookery flourished, for this gregarious society made a cult of good eating and boasted cooks and hostesses extraordinaire!"

Within its four hundred pages, there is but one recipe for turnip greens (none for collards); the only one calling for black-eyed peas is in the form of a party dip. Rather, these recipes lean more toward the way Deltans at the top of the social ladder entertained: eggplant and oysters by Craig Claiborne's mother, Kathleen; pâté de foie gras made with chicken livers and mushrooms, contributed by Mrs. Jeptha Barbour, mother of Mississippi's former governor; turtle soup with rum made with "Bayou" turtle meat; classic colonial desserts like charlotte russe and tipsy pudding.

A section of suggested menus for the way circa-1970s "Bayou-Folk Entertain" includes a plantation hunt breakfast, a "Coke party" or morning coffee, and a cocktail party featuring "cocktails mixed to order" or "Mississippi Gambler," a recipe found between the milk punch and the lobster bisque.

Mississippi Gambler

ACCORDING TO ARTHUR CLARK JR., THE CONTRIBUTOR, THIS MAKES "ENOUGH FOR 4 DRINKING SOUTHERN GENTLEMEN OR 16 NICE LADIES!"

12 small to medium lemons with thin skins
4 cups high-quality bourbon whiskey
4 cups water
1 cup sugar
Fresh mint leaves, for garnish

Squeeze the lemon juice into a large nonmetal container. Set aside 8 of the lemon rinds. Add the bourbon, water, and sugar and stir well. Drop in the 8 rinds. Set aside for 24 hours.

Remove the lemon rinds and squeeze their liquid into the container. Strain the bourbon mixture and return it to the container. Let sit at room temperature for at least 3 days and up to 1 week. The mixture improves with the passage of time. Two days before serving, place in the freezer. When ready to serve, scoop the icy slush (it will not freeze solid) into silver julep cups. Add a cocktail straw to each cup and garnish with mint leaves.

DELTA WINGS FESTIVAL AND GUMBO COOK-OFF

☆ **THE MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY** is the aerial artery that geese and ducks in their undulating thousands travel each fall and winter toward warmer climates. Closely following the path of the Mississippi River from Canada and the Upper Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico, it is the longest migration route in the Western Hemisphere. Flooded agricultural fields, vast tracts of timber, and the intricate network of waterways that feed into the Mississippi make the Delta a waterfowl hunter's paradise.

The tiny town of Drew, close to the Sunflower River where bird traffic is especially heavy, bills itself as the "Waterfowl Capital of the State." Since 2006, it has hosted the Delta Wings Festival, with retriever shows, duck-calling contests, and a waterfowl banquet among the festivities. But the main attraction is the gumbo cook-off, which offers a grand prize of one thousand dollars. Contestants prepare their original recipes over propane burners. The rules stipulate that wild duck must be the main ingredient and that the base must be a roux made by traditional methods. Mixes of any kind are strictly prohibited.

With so many freezers bulging with duck meat, it stands to reason that Deltans are adept at cooking it. And judging from entries in numerous Delta cookbooks, gumbo seems to be among the most popular uses for it.

Mississippi Flyway Duck Gumbo

The following recipe is inspired by one in *Pick of the Crop*. It does not call for okra, but if you wish, you can add a cup or so of sliced pods during the last 20 to 30 minutes of cooking. But in that case, skip the filé, because both okra and file act as thickeners, and the texture could become gummy.

MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS

2 wild ducks, cleaned, dressed, and cut into serving pieces, or 4 to 5 pounds bone-in chicken thighs
Salt, ground black pepper, and Cajun seasoning blend, to taste
⅓ cup vegetable oil, plus more as needed
⅔ cup all-purpose flour
2 cups chopped yellow onions
1 tablespoon minced garlic
1 cup chopped green bell peppers (or half green and half red)
1 cup chopped celery
1 pound andouille or other smoked sausage, diced
2 quarts water
1 pound canned stewed tomatoes
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce, or to taste
2 bay leaves
2 tablespoons minced parsley
1 teaspoon dried thyme
2 to 3 tablespoons filé powder
Cooked white rice, for serving
Chopped parsley and/or green onions, for garnish

Season the duck liberally with salt, pepper, and Cajun seasoning. In a large, heavy pot or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the duck and brown both sides. Drain on a paper towel–lined platter. Pour the fat from the pot through a sieve lined with a coffee filter. Scrape out and discard any blackened bits in the pan. Return ⅔ cup of the fat to the pot, adding more vegetable oil if needed. (Or use all vegetable oil instead of the duck fat.)

To make the roux, reheat the fat over medium heat. Stir in the flour with a wooden spoon and cook slowly, stirring, until light golden brown. This should take about 30 minutes. If the roux is cooking too fast, reduce the heat slightly. Allow the roux to continue browning, stirring often, until it is the color of milk chocolate, about 5 minutes more. Stir in the onions, garlic, bell pepper, and celery and continue cooking 5 to 10 minutes more, until the roux turns a deep, dark chocolate color. Add the duck and sausage, and cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the water, tomatoes, Worcestershire, bay leaves, parsley, and thyme. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and let simmer for 1 to 2 hours, skimming off the fat as needed.

Remove the duck with a slotted spoon, let cool, and then remove the meat from the bones. Discard the bones and fat and return the meat to the pot. Season with salt, pepper, and Cajun seasoning. Continue to cook 15 to 20 minutes more. Stir in the filé powder. Serve over rice in deep bowls, garnished with chopped parsley and/or green onions.

10 GREENWOOD AND ENVIRONS

From Cotton Capital of the World to Home of the High-Tech Range

THE ENTRANCE INTO GREENWOOD via Grand Boulevard is, indeed, grand. For miles and miles you drive southward through endless farmland and swampland along Money Road, which eventually becomes a short bridge that crosses the Tallahatchie River. Suddenly, you're on a wide street lined by towering oaks and impressive homes of diverse architectural styles, some dating to the early 1900s. Locals refer to this stretch simply as "the Boulevard," sometimes with a mock aristocratic accent. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Garden Clubs of America have at various times placed it among America's ten most beautiful streets.

Greenwood flourished as one of the world's leading cotton markets until the Civil War. After Reconstruction it bounced back with the arrival of two rail lines through town. For more than half a century, downtown Greenwood bustled with expensive restaurants, hotels, and stores that sold diamonds and minks. But like the rest of the region, Greenwood's economy steadily declined as cotton's dominance faded. Then a fourth-generation Delta businessman came up with an idea for a product that would reverse those fortunes once again.

While designing a new home for his family in the 1980s, Fred Carl Jr. asked his wife, Margaret, what kind of stove she wanted. She told him she longed for a heavy-duty Chambers model like her mother's. But since they were no longer being manufactured and there were no other modern alternatives on the market, Carl, a building contractor, decided to invent one. Several years and many rejections later, a manufacturer in California finally bit, thus launching the Viking Range Corporation.

As orders poured in, the company moved production to a facility in eastern Tennessee, and when his company outgrew that operation, he set up headquarters in Greenwood, rolling out the first ranges on his home soil in 1989. Viking quickly became the town's biggest employer, leading Carl to spearhead an urban renewal effort that would ignite tourism throughout the Delta.

The long-abandoned buildings along the riverfront known as Cotton Row have been restored and turned into Viking offices. The company's headquarters is the former opera house. Just over the circa-1924 Keesler Bridge and a block east is Howard Street, where once-vacant and crumbling buildings are now occupied by restaurants, a gourmet cooking school and cookware store, antique stores, a classy southerncentric bookstore, and a swanky gift shop specializing in all Mississippi-made products. On one corner is the crown jewel of all the Viking properties: the Alluvian Hotel, a fifty-room European style luxury hotel that has become a tourist destination in itself.

Though no longer king, cotton is still vital to this town of 16,000. Staplcotn Cooperative, which still markets a fifth of the cotton grown in North America, is also located in downtown Greenwood. The Museum of the Mississippi Delta (formerly the Cottonlandia Museum) on the outskirts of town offers an impressive collection of agricultural, military, and archeological artifacts, as well as a room devoted to Mississippi artwork.

The farther you stray from the north side of town and that cluster of blocks that Viking rebuilt, the more Greenwood resembles other beleaguered Delta towns: boarded up buildings with broken windows, streets with potholes, dusty old thrift stores and pawn shops. If you're willing to explore, there are rough diamonds to be found, especially when it comes to food. If you need some guidance, ask someone at the front desk of the Alluvian.

Viking offers tours, festivals, and educational projects that include visits to the upscale and down-at-heel sections of town, with the Alluvian as home base for more wide-ranging tours of the region. A few miles north of town,

on a cotton plantation along the Tallahatchie River, a group of restored shotgun shacks called Tallahatchie Flats (see photo opposite page 1) offers lodging similar to the Shack-Up Inn in Clarksdale, along with nightly bonfires and occasional public and private events.

★ **Giardina's.** 314 Howard Street. 662-455-4227. www.thealluvian.com

Once a Depression-era eatery specializing in cheap sandwiches to go, Giardina's is now the most deluxe dining room in town.

After arriving in Greenwood with his family from the Sicilian town of Cefalu in the 1920s, Sam Giardina opened a market that also served meals. In 1936, his brother Joe opened another restaurant called Giardina's on Park Avenue, which was then just outside the city limits. As business grew, this curbside operation morphed into a sit-down dining room, with guests served in private curtained booths so they could enjoy bootleg hooch with dinner. The family continued to run the restaurant on

Charles and Diana Cooper's Milk Punch

Giardina's offers a pull-out-the-stops Sunday brunch sporadically, heavy on regionally sourced ingredients like Benton's bacon from Tennessee, Indianola pecans, local farm eggs, and Delta Grind grits. From the bar, you can also order Cooper Family Milk Punch. This simple Old South morning cocktail is served nearly every Sunday in the home of the Greenwood family who shared the recipe.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

1 quart whole milk
3 heaping tablespoons confectioners' sugar
1 to 2 tablespoons pure vanilla extract
Ice cubes
1½ to 2 ounces bourbon per serving, or to taste
Freshly ground nutmeg

In a pitcher, combine the milk, sugar, and vanilla. Chill. Fill julep cups or highball glasses with ice. Divide the milk mixture and bourbon among the cups and stir well. Sprinkle with nutmeg and serve.

Park Avenue until 2003, when Viking Range Corporation bought it and moved it to the ground floor of the newly renovated former Hotel Irving, which is now the Alluvian.

Fourteen booths concealed with plush forest-green curtains line the hallway of the twenty-first-century Giardina's. The main dining room adjoins a cozy bar, and in the rear is a spacious brick courtyard. Besides the simple but well-prepared dishes for which it has always been known—grilled pompano, steaks, oysters on the half-shell—the menu includes classic Sicilian recipes from the Giardina family files, along with Delta steak house classics like hot tamales, shrimp rémoulade, and fried green tomatoes topped with lump crabmeat and warm comeback sauce.

★ **Larry's Fish House.** Highway 7 South. Itta Bena. 662-254-6001; 662-254-9621.

Larry's Fish House doesn't look a lot different from the residential brick ranch house it once was, inside or out. Bordered by cotton fields in this farm town of about two thousand, where two huge catfish processing companies are based, Larry's attracts a substantial word-of-mouth crowd from Greenwood and beyond who come for the fresh-from-the-pond catfish and wholesome, family atmosphere Deltans seek in a catfish house, perhaps as much as the food. (No smoking or drinking here.) The four large dining rooms can accommodate several hundred customers but still has the feel of someone's home. A huge aquarium built into the wall holds baby catfish no bigger than your pinky, which come from the owners' ponds.

The Kelly family has been involved in all aspects of the catfish industry, from production to harvest to dinner plate, for more than forty years. Like most other Delta catfish houses, their restaurant is a straightforward buffet with basic southern vegetables, crinkle-cut fries, hush puppies, and an array of country salads mixed up by family members, like cucumber and onion salad, marinated black-eyed peas, and "copper penny" carrots that look and taste like what you'd find at any circa-1965 church potluck dinner. The endless helpings of fresh catfish, though, are the reason people come. Besides the

Larry's Hush Puppies

The Kellys rely on a premade hush puppy product from one of the local catfish processing companies to accommodate their high-volume restaurant business. But for smaller catering gigs, Larry Sr. makes them from scratch, following this reliable method that produces light, crunchy orbs with just the right hint of onion and sweetness.

MAKES 10 TO 12 SERVINGS

2 cups self-rising white cornmeal
1 cup self-rising flour
1 tablespoon sugar
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 medium onion, chopped
1½ cups whole milk, plus more if needed
Peanut oil for deep-fat frying

In a large bowl, stir together the cornmeal, flour, and sugar. Add the egg, onion, and milk. Stir until thoroughly mixed, adding a little more milk if needed to make a pasty batter. Heat the oil in a deep-fat fryer to 375°F. Drop the batter by scant tablespoonfuls into the hot oil to fry until the hush puppies are golden brown and float to the top. Drain well and serve hot.

ubiquitous fillet, the cornmeal-coated catfish can also be eaten the old-fashioned way with bones and tails intact. Or you can get the fillets smoked, blackened, or broiled.

★ **Lusco's.** 722 Carrollton Avenue. 601-453-5365.

For more than seventy-five years, this shabby brick storefront on the seamy side of the tracks has been the epicenter of Delta social life, where birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated, loved ones wooed, and families and friends united.

The double doors underneath the Coca-Cola sign open into a front room that functions as a lobby. One side is cluttered with remnants of the grocery store that once operated there; the other is filled with the trappings of a living room that hasn't been remodeled in decades.

Patrons line up beside the counter to check in with a woman wearing reading glasses and holding a clipboard, who greets nearly everyone with a hug or a hand squeeze. That's Karen Pinkston, who has run the restaurant with her husband, Andy, a fourth-generation Lusco, since 1981. You can tell who the regulars are; once accounted for, they head straight to a worn wooden china cabinet, help themselves to wine glasses, and proceed to uncork the bottles they've brought in paper bags.

When your party is called, a young waitress leads you down a hallway flanked on either side by curtained booths separated by wooden partitions, as if you're about to try on clothes in a department store. But instead of a bench and a three-way mirror inside, there is a single round table set with linens, a glass-covered candle, and simple white china and silver.

For the next couple of hours, this room is yours. A metal coat rack stands in the corner, and there is a buzzer on the wall for summoning a server. Decorations are spare and often recall famous patrons. In one booth is a poem by Willie Morris scribbled on a Lusco's tab; in another hangs a photo of father-and-son football legends Archie and Peyton Manning.

Those booths have been part of the Lusco's dining experience ever since it opened in 1933—on the day Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated. Its history began more than a decade earlier, however, when Charles and Marie Lusco, Sicilian immigrants who came to Greenwood by way of Louisiana and Vicksburg, ran a grocery store several blocks away. That was during Prohibition, and Charles "Papa" Lusco found he could boost his income by selling the cotton barons bottles of his home brew, along with home-cooked meals, in a small back room also used for playing cards and dominoes. After a fire destroyed that building, the Luscos relocated to their present location and added private booths, where their moneyed clientele could continue to eat dinner, sip hooch, play cards, and conduct business deals out of the public eye. Exactly what else went on behind those curtains has been the subject of much local gossip ever since.

Back then, the front area operated as the grocery store, and a screen door covered by a curtain separated the store from the hallway that led to the booths and kitchen. Only customers who had been told the password were allowed in. Some would bring back fresh seafood and other hard-to-get ingredients on trips to New Orleans and ask the cooks to prepare it for them.

Among the most prized of these delicacies was pompano—a mild-tasting fish with snowy-white flesh. One of the longtime cooks broiled and served it whole, with a seasoned lemon butter sauce of her own devising, and it remains one of the most popular menu items today. Jumbo shrimp broiled in a zingy, buttery sauce laced with Worcestershire are almost as famous, as are the broiled certified Angus steaks. The Pinkstons have kept the old favorites—the spinach soufflé, the gumbo, the signature New Orleans–style salad of butter lettuce, tomato, anchovy, olives, and capers in a garlicky vinaigrette. Arugula and radicchio have appeared in salads in recent years.

The home-brewed hooch is history. Nowadays, Lusco's serves only beer and wine coolers, though you are welcome to bring your own wine or liquor.

Another change from the old days: no more butter flipping. For reasons no one seems to be able to explain, customers used to catapult butter pats with their knives onto the pressed-tin ceiling, where they would stick, often until the heating system kicked on and caused them to melt onto the clothes and hairdos of the patrons. Eventually signs prohibiting this "malicious mischief" were placed on tables, and customers got the message. The grease spots have since been painted over. But those stories continue to live on, as do the other tales that add to the mystique—and the attraction—of Lusco's.

MARTHA FOOSE: TELLING STORIES WITH A SKILLET AND A WHISK

My toughest audience is not the James Beard Foundation. To me, my toughest audience is my grandmother's bridge partners.

—MARTHA FOOSE

★ **IN 2008,** Martha Hall Foose's *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea* won the coveted James Beard award for Best American Cookbook, undoubtedly as much for the stories about life in the Delta as the recipes they inspired. She writes of tamales tied in twine and sold in coffee cans at Doe's Eat Place, of fine ambrosias made by hard-working church ladies, and of the early morning sounds of shotguns across the river in fall signaling duck gumbo season.

Cooking and storytelling both come naturally to Foose, as they do for most Deltans. Foose developed a love for southern literature listening to her Yazoo City elementary schoolteachers read Willie Morris's tales of growing up in her hometown. Out of high school she got a job in the café at the Faulkner-centric Square Books bookstore in Oxford and became hooked on cookbooks.

She studied cooking in Paris, traveled the world, and baked in top-rated restaurants in Los Angeles and New Orleans before making her way up the river to Minneapolis to work in Pillsbury's cookbook division. It was there on one snowy Easter that the homesickness finally got to her. She and her baker husband, Donald Bender, packed up and returned to the house on her family's Pluto Plantation in Tchula, about halfway between Yazoo City and Greenwood.

For several years Foose and Bender baked artisanal breads, biscuits, molasses cookies, and a bevy of southern treats at the acclaimed Bottletree Bakery in Oxford. Later they brought their baking talents to Greenwood, where they ran the Mockingbird Bakery at the Viking cookware center, and Foose became the director of the Viking Cooking School. Though the bakery has since closed, Bender still produces the baked goods for all the Viking properties and special events around the Delta. Foose's second book, *A Southerly Way*, was released in spring 2011, and she continues to promote the region and its foodways in cooking demonstrations and readings at events all over the country.

Broiled Pompano, Greenwood-Style

Lusco's keeps the formula for their legendary signature dish top secret, but Martha Foose has worked out her own interpretation, found in *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*. Pompano is hard to find in markets but can be specially ordered from your fishmonger—and is well worth it. Served whole, it makes a spectacular presentation for very little time and effort.

Following is the extremely simple method Foose uses for broiling pompano to perfection. In her book, she suggests drizzling it with a vinaigrette based on cottonseed oil, a nod to the local economy. Since that is not easy to find outside the region either, I recommend as an alternative Miss Mary's Salad Dressing from Grisanti's in Memphis, though any good vinaigrette (especially one with lots of fresh garlic) will also be good.

MAKES 2 SERVINGS

2 (1½-pound) whole pompano, dressed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
½ cup garlicky vinaigrette, such as Miss Mary's Salad Dressing (page 46)
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut in small pieces
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley (optional)
Crusty French bread, for serving

Place a large roasting pan on an oven rack set 4 inches below the broiler. Preheat the broiler.

With a sharp knife, deeply score one side of each fish diagonally in both directions, creating a diamond pattern. Season with salt and pepper inside and out.

Brush the hot roasting pan with the oil. Place the fish in the pan, scored side up. Drizzle the fish with the dressing and dot with butter. Broil until the flesh is opaque, about 10 minutes. Transfer the fish to individual serving platters and spoon the pan drippings over them. Sprinkle with parsley, if desired. Serve with crusty bread for sopping.

★ **Mai Little China.** Highland Park Shopping Center. 617 West Park Avenue. 662-451-1101.

The Mississippi Delta is full of Chinese restaurants with steam tables laden with the familiar all-you-can-eat Cantonese standbys, plus a handful of obligatory all-American dishes. Mai Little China, located in a shopping center with a Payless ShoeSource and Sherwin-Williams paint store, belongs in a category of its own.

Mai Little China's cavernous dining room is tastefully Spartan, with black lacquer furniture covered in white tablecloths and unadorned walls painted rich shades of crimson and gold. At the back is a buffet table that typically draws big crowds at lunch, not only for the all-you-can-eat General Tso chicken and beef lo mein found everywhere, but also a full range of Delta favorites from black-eyed peas to chicken spaghetti, and, most notably, a selection of specialties chef Matthew Mai describes as "neo-Asian-French fusion."

Mai may very well be one of the most worldly and versatile chefs in the entire Delta. He was trained in French and Asian techniques in Hong Kong and cooked in fine restaurants before his grandmother arranged for him to meet a friend's daughter in Boston. They fell in love, married, and decided to settle down in Greenwood, where his wife had grown up.

With family help, Matthew and Cathy Mai set out to serve a diverse clientele with the flavors they knew and loved, while raising the expectations of what a small-town Chinese restaurant was capable of producing. Appetizers have included jumbo shrimp seasoned with barbecue rub and grilled, or fried in a batter infused with Mississippi-brewed Lazy Magnolia Southern Pecan beer and coconut. Mai also glams up the ever-popular artichoke dip, adding escargot and roasted red pepper to the unabashedly rich, mayonnaisey concoction, and serves it with crusty French bread.

Mai's entrée specials include steak au poivre, poached duck in wine reduction, macadamia mahi mahi, and sweet and sour grouper. On occasion, they have offered Akaushi steak, said to rival Kobe beef, for one hundred dollars a pop.

When I visited, I ordered Catfish Mai, his signature dish, a stunning presentation of sautéed local fillet topped with jumbo lump crabmeat, shrimp, prosciutto, and sugar snap peas in a light, wine-infused cream sauce. He also serves catfish the more traditional way, fried along with oysters and scallops atop a bed of French fries.

Dessert is not the obligatory commercial green tea ice cream or red tea ice cream. Mai and his wife make cheesecakes, crème brûlées, and several surprises, all delicious and beautifully garnished with real whipped cream and fresh edible flowers.

★ **Miss Sippy's Coffee Shop and Mercantile.** 609 Lexington Street. Carrollton. 662-237-0222.

About ten miles from Greenwood is Carrollton, a verdant and picturesque hill town built around a square with a handsome old courthouse. *The Reivers*, the 1969 movie version of William Faulkner's last novel, set in turn-of-the-century Mississippi and starring Steve McQueen, was filmed here.

Directly across from that courthouse is Miss Sippy's, a gift shop and eatery with Belinda Morrison's beatific hand behind the cooking. She's a terrific baker. For breakfast, she makes muffins filled with fruit preserves (fig, the day I visited) along with freshly baked breakfast rolls—swirled with cinnamon or topped with a translucent orange glaze flecked with zest. For lunch, homemade soups like chili or tomato and roasted pepper change daily, as do specials such as chicken pot pie or black beans and rice. Desserts include cheesecake or one of several pies, such as Key lime or peanut butter. Pimento cheese, soups, and chicken salad are also sold by the pint, and bread by the loaf.

Couches and armchairs dressed up with autumn-toned silk pillows make a cozy gathering spot near the picture window. A small dining area is set with wooden tables and ladder-back chairs, and in the back is another dining room where bridge players regularly gather. Coffee comes hot and cold, plain and fancy. Herbal tea or fruit smoothies are options as well.

A CASSEROLE CULTURE, PRECONVENIENCE

☆ **DELTA FAMILIES** are accustomed to having prolific gardens, and community cookbooks are full of recipes that make use of that bounty. This recipe is based on one in a tattered little spiral-bound cookbook called *Itta Bena's Favorite Recipes* published in 1950 by the Woman's Club of Itta Bena. That's the tiny farm town about fifteen miles from Greenwood, where B. B. King was born and where Jerry Rice played football at Mississippi Valley State University. (I thank my friend Elizabeth Lee Greene for purchasing it for fifty cents at a yard sale in Atlanta, knowing it might be helpful to me in my book research.)

Mrs. Innes McIntyre's Squash Soufflé

Unlike other squash casserole recipes weighted down with canned soups, processed cheeses, and crushed crackers, this one is lightened with beaten egg whites and makes a lovely, delicate accompaniment to any simple main dish. While the soufflé will collapse a bit once it emerges from the oven, it will still look pretty for several hours after baking.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

4 medium yellow summer squash, chopped (about 6 cups)
2 medium onions, chopped
¼ pound (1 stick) butter, melted
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon sugar
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
3 large eggs, separated
4 ounces grated full-flavored cheese, such as sharp Cheddar, Parmesan, or Gruyère (1 cup)

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter a 2- to 2½-quart soufflé dish.

In a large saucepan, cook the squash and onions in boiling salted water until very tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Drain the squash and onion mixture well in a colander, pressing out as much liquid as you can. Transfer into a large bowl and mash with a potato masher. Stir in the melted butter, flour, sugar, salt, and pepper. Blend in the egg yolks and the grated cheese. In a large mixing bowl, beat the egg whites to stiff peaks. Fold the egg whites into the squash mixture.

Scrape into the prepared soufflé dish and bake until puffed and nicely browned, 40 to 45 minutes. Serve immediately.

★ **The Crystal Grill.** 423 Carrollton Avenue. 662-453-6530.

The Crystal Grill, one of the region's most celebrated restaurants, has a long and loaded past. Nearly a century ago, the building it occupies on this scruffy street corner housed a hotel and small diner called the Elite Café, which served sandwiches and simple meals from four a.m. to midnight, mostly to railroad men and passengers who walked over from the train station across the street.

Then in the 1940s, Mike Ballas, who'd just arrived in the Delta from his native Greece, turned it into a full-fledged restaurant, preparing most of the meals using recipes he had learned by reading cookbooks. Over time, he hired more cooks, and the tiny dining area grew into a warren of rooms that can accommodate more than two hundred patrons.

Now run by Ballas's son, Johnny, this institution holds tight to its reputation for breathtaking mile-high meringue pies, bottomless pitchers of sweet tea, baskets of feather-light homemade yeast rolls, and a lengthy roster of thoughtfully prepared comfort fare from seafood gumbo, to meatloaf, to sweet potato soufflé.

The staff is exuberantly welcoming. The senior Ballas, now in his nineties, still patrols the dining rooms, greeting customers by name and occasionally pulling up a chair to chat. Johnny and his wife, Beverly, are equally gregarious and go out of their way to make newcomers feel at home.

That hospitality has not always been so widely extended. For more than fifteen years, the restaurant was known as the Crystal Club, and it operated as a private dining facility reserved for whites only. These "key clubs," as they were then known, sprang up all over the South after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited all public places from denying admittance based on skin color. When you entered the front door, a sign inside the vestibule prohibited you from going farther until you presented a membership card.

Restaurateurs had complicated reasons for going to such lengths to remain legally segregated. Some, including the Ballases, vowed that racism had nothing to do with it, and pragmatism everything. In his seminal book *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, James C. Cobb noted that local officials—especially in hotbeds of racial conflict like Greenwood—not only refused to enforce the Civil Rights Act but also threatened and intimidated citizens who did comply. It was not uncommon for them to refuse to accept responsibility for the owners' safety if violence broke out and to warn businesses that their livelihoods would be ruined if they voluntarily integrated.

No one seems to know exactly the year the Crystal Club changed its sign back to the Crystal Grill. Locals contend, however, that the restaurant had gradually been loosening the rules for years, and when the return to the original name finally became official—sometime in the early 1980s—it happened so quietly hardly anyone even noticed.

Today that vestibule is no longer fully enclosed but opens directly into the dining room. The door that once prohibited "nonmembers" from entering had been replaced by a small wall painted with a colorful still life.

Inside, on this Sunday afternoon, a racially and generationally diverse after-church crowd occupied nearly every table, with a long line stretching from the hostess stand to the door waiting to be seated.

My companions and I ate catfish amandine, seafood gumbo, fried chicken livers, and crusty macaroni and cheese. For dessert, I got the coconut cream pie—the very last piece before it was sold out, I was told. It was every bit the masterpiece it was cracked up to be. As we all plowed into it with our forks, I caught a glimpse of Mike Ballas sitting at a table and sharing a laugh with two middle-aged black female customers.

★ The Delta Bistro. 117 Main Street. 662-455-9575. www.deltabistro.com

Inside this tall brick building once used for grading cotton hangs a faded cotton quilt with a rural scene and the words "Alice Waters" painted on it in broad, black brushstrokes. It is a portrait, explains chef/artist Taylor Bowen Ricketts, of "a self-sufficient chef outside of London catching chickens humanely," in a manner in which Alice Waters, the organic food guru, would have approved of.

Ricketts supports sustainable agriculture at this casually chic downtown Greenwood restaurant owned by the Viking Corporation. She offers a creative twist on the deep-fried basics like catfish and green tomatoes, along with original seasonal creations such as coffee-crusted lamb chops with sweet potato puree and longhorn okra from Greenwood's Saturday farmers market. She has simmered lady peas in a ragoût, stuffed tamales with crawfish, and seared three types of greens with bacon fat in a skillet deglazed with balsamic vinegar. The coffee is fair trade; the lemonade, fresh-squeezed.

Delta Bistro has a relaxed, uptown feel. Whitewashed wood partitions, each with an opaque window embedded with dried flowers, separate the tables of the main dining area. Prohibition Era–style private booths along

Taylor Bowen Ricketts's Shrimp with Pork Belly and Stone-Ground Cheese Grits

Ricketts has served this dish as a restaurant special and for numerous private events, sometimes replacing the shrimp with Lauren Farms freshwater prawns (see page 177) and always with Delta Grind grits (see page 147).

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

TOMATO CONFIT

3 cups olive oil
5 pounds tomatoes, cored and diced
1 cup peeled garlic cloves
1 or 2 bay leaves
1 or 2 fresh thyme sprigs

CHEESE GRITS

2 cups water
2 cups heavy cream, half and half, or milk
2 teaspoons salt
1 cup coarse-ground yellow grits
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter
4 ounces soft, fresh goat cheese
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste

SHRIMP

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 pound pork belly, cut into ½-inch cubes
½ cup chopped green onions
2 to 2½ pounds large shrimp, peeled and deveined

For the confit: Preheat the oven to 375°F. Place the olive oil, tomatoes, garlic, bay leaf, and thyme sprig in a shallow layer in one large baking dish or two smaller baking dishes. Roast until the tomatoes are very soft, about 45 minutes. Remove the dish from the oven and let the tomatoes cool to room temperature. Strain the tomatoes. Discard the bay leaf and the thyme stem. Discard the oil or save it for another use; store oil covered and refrigerated for up to 1 week.

For the grits: In a medium saucepan, bring the water, cream, and salt to a boil over medium-high heat. Whisk in the grits and reduce the heat. Cook at a bare simmer, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, until thick and creamy, 30 to 45 minutes. Add more cream or water if the grits get too thick. Stir in the butter, goat cheese, smoked paprika, and cayenne pepper. Keep warm.

For the shrimp: In a large cast-iron skillet, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the pork belly and sauté until browned. Drain off all but about 2 tablespoons of the grease. Add 4 cups of the tomato confit and the green onions. Cook until the tomatoes break down slightly, about 10 minutes. Mash the garlic cloves with a potato masher. Add the shrimp and cook only until done, about 5 minutes.

Spoon the grits into a serving dish, top the with shrimp mixture, and serve at once.

the side are moodily lit with modern light fixtures and secluded by veils of silver beads.

After running several popular restaurants in Oxford, where she got her fine arts degree at Ole Miss, Ricketts and her husband, Darby, moved their family to Greenwood and opened Delta Fresh Market, the precursor to Delta Bistro. Several years ago she had the opportunity not only to meet her culinary hero, Alice Waters, but also to cook her a meal. Waters was touring school systems around the country to promote the Edible Schoolyard Project she started in Berkeley, California, where her famed restaurant Chez Panisse is located, to teach children about fresh produce.

Waters wanted "a full Greenwood immersion," Ricketts recalls. So Ricketts gathered fresh turnips, made barbecue and corn cakes, and served Lazy Magnolia beer from the Gulf Coast, the state's only microbrewery.

Shrimmp (or prawns) with pork belly and stone-ground cheese grits is a specialty of Ricketts's that encapsulates the best of the Delta—old and new.

MORE LOCAL FLAVOR

★ **Honest Abe's.** 201 Park Avenue. 662-455-2575.

Located between Greenwood's toniest neighborhood and most congested business district, the flagship Honest Abe's location is a convenient spot to grab a cup of coffee and pastry on your way out of town, either from the drive-through window or the tidy dining room inside. Or if you're craving a hot tamale, pimento cheese sandwich, barbecue, or chicken salad, they've got all that, too. The airy doughnuts are made fresh daily, and they also offer the savory filled Czech pastry known as kolaches popularized by Shipley's, a longtime regional competitor based in the little Czech town of West, Texas. Lee Abraham, a longtime Greenwood attorney, started Honest Abe's in 2005 and has since added locations in Oxford and Itta Bena.

★ **Rib Shack.** 900 Main Street. 662-459-1499.

The sign above this wooden stand includes the words "Fresh Off the Grill," but the proprietors could have saved themselves some paint. Here on this busy corner of Main and Palace streets across from a KFC, the grillmeister is as visible as day behind the window as he tends slabs of ribs, tips, and other pork parts in a haze of spicy fumes. The rib tip sandwich—a huge portion of charred, greasy meat swimming in thick sauce—comes in a

Styrofoam box with waxed paper over it and several slices of white bread atop that, for sopping up the messy and delicious sauce.

★ **Steven's Bar-B-Q.** 208 Fulton Street. 662-453-0313.

This modest meat-and-three café with the American flag hanging in the window has none of the uptown ambitions of the Viking-owned properties that surround it. It's run by Steven Goodwin, a friendly and unpretentious fellow who once sold snow cones until he had a heart attack and decided to pursue his real dream: opening his own barbecue restaurant. Though that's undoubtedly not what the doctor ordered, he seems to have found his calling. Besides ribs and pulled pork, he does a particularly fine beef brisket (only on certain days of the week). He also offers corn shuck–wrapped hot tamales, freshly made by a local expert. On Mondays, he turns the leftover tamales into a Tex-Mex style tamale casserole with black beans, tomatoes, corn, and cheese—a tasty, unconventional offering on his otherwise standard southern-style buffet.

★ **Webster's Food and Drink.** 216 West Claiborne Avenue. 662-455-1215.

This comfortable hangout in a rambling old clapboard house near the Keesler Bridge has changed hands several times since it became a public watering hole in 1975. Its current owners, who are also Viking employees, ditched the former airplane theme for a warm and sophisticated Delta-esque atmosphere, with black-and-white photos of alluvial landscapes, a stone fireplace, and an expansive deck. Here, in addition to the usual Delta restaurant standbys, you can get tamales husk-wrapped or deep-fried, sweet tea–fried chicken, and a glass of Delta Moon Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon, specially blended for Greenwood in Sonoma Valley and billed as "smooth as the Tallahatchie River."

★ **Yianni's.** 506 Yalobusha Street. 662-455-6789.

Hidden behind a Taco Bell, this azalea-pink stucco building tends to get overlooked by tourists. But here you can order from a broad menu that covers all the Delta bases, plus a handful of pleasant surprises. Their salads are fresh and huge, with homemade dressings and croutons. The classic mayonnaise chicken salad in a phyllo shell is a nod to the owners' Greek heritage, as is the green salad topped with oregano-spiced shrimp. The seasonal fruit plate is one of those retro dishes that's as stylish here as ever:

fresh fruits tossed with celery seed dressing, with a molded gelatin salad of the day, accompanied by finger sandwiches. Yianni's is also one of the few places in town that serves brunch, and for theirs they go to town, with grits casserole, egg dishes, and assorted Cajun fare.

BAPTIST TOWN

East of downtown is a neighborhood of mostly decrepit shotgun houses along unpaved streets called Baptist Town. Rife with crime and poverty, it is an unlikely tourist destination. But serious blues aficionados have been trekking there for years. David "Honeyboy" Edwards claimed that fellow bluesman Robert Johnson died there in 1938, earning it a Blues Trail Marker, with a dedication ceremony in 2009.

Baptist Town also has a tiny museum called Back in the Day with blues memorabilia, where longtime resident Sylvester Hoover gives tours. Hoover and his wife, Mary, are experts in two cherished aspects of Greenwood history: the legend of Robert Johnson and the famous soul food dishes that also grew up here. Sylvester is chairman of the deacon board of the Little Zion Baptist Church just north of Greenwood, where a tombstone under a pecan tree marks Johnson's final resting place. The unofficial mayor of Baptist Town, Hoover has led many a tour there and is full of stories about Johnson and other blues artists.

★ **Hoover's Grocery, Kitchen, and Laundromat.** 200 Young Street. 662-453-3825.

The Hoovers have run several popular soul food cafés over the years; one was destroyed by fire, another by a sputtering economy. Now they operate an old white frame convenience store with a deli counter and Laundromat, where Mary still occasionally sells baked goods, including her famous "butter roll," an old-time dessert similar to a rich cobbler without the fruit.

In 2011, Baptist Town drew national attention as one of the main settings in the movie version of Kathryn Stockett's best-selling novel *The Help*. The Hoovers both had roles in the movie, on screen and off. Mary Hoover, along with cookbook author Martha Foose, prepared the spreads for the food scenes. During filming, members of the cast and crew became inspired by the creative spirit of the struggling neighborhood and joined a local effort to build a community center there. The premiere in Madison, Mississippi, raised more than $150,000.

★ **Spooney's Bar-Be-Que.** 404 Pelican Street. 662-709-1465.

Baptist Town is home to another Greenwood culinary legend: LeRoy Kenter Jr., aka "Spooney," one of the best-loped pit masters in the Delta south of Memphis. For years, he slathered ribs and chicken with a sauce of his own devising in a storefront on the fringes of downtown. When hard times forced him to close, he moved his locomotive-size smoker in front of his mother's Baptist Town shotgun home, and he's been there ever since, operating at somewhat erratic hours. Die-hard fans seek him out regardless.

VIKING PROPERTIES

Besides Giardina's and Delta Bistro, the kitchenware client is responsible for these tourist draws.

★ **The Alluvian.** 318 Howard St. 662-453-2114; 866-600-5201. www.thealluvian.com

This ritzy, European-style luxury boutique hotel that was previously the Hotel Irving derives its name from a term playwright Tennessee Williams used to describe a person living on this alluvial soil. Throughout its plush, Zen-like surroundings of polished wood and marble are paintings commissioned by leading Mississippi artists—most strikingly, Bill Dunlap's rendering of a hunting dog peering out from a tilted rural

sunset, which covers most of a lobby wall. Besides Giardina's, the high-end Delta steakhouse on the ground floor, local-flavored amenities include a complimentary southern buffet breakfast with artisanal in-house-baked breads, a southern library (with films and music as well as reading materials), spa treatments with Delta River Rock massages and a "muddy waters" therapeutic bath, and gift sets with sweet tea bath salts and locally baked miniature caramel layer cakes.

★ Viking Cooking School / Factory Tour. 325C Howard Street. 662-451-6750.

Across the street from the Alluvian, the Viking School and Training Center offers hands-on and demonstration classes in what was once the showroom for the Delta's first Ford dealership. While classes range from sushi rolling to designer cookie decorating, tourists especially go for the southern-themed classes. For one called Cooking the Blues, students learn to roll hot tamales, fry dill pickles, and bake mile-high coconut meringue pie while listening to live blues.

Today, Viking cooking classes are held in more than a dozen cities nationwide. But only at the flagship location in Greenwood can you don plastic goggles and witness slabs of eighteen-gauge steel and eighteen-thousand-Btu burners as they're transformed into high-tech ranges. It's a fascinating factory tour that is available for groups by reservation.

★ The Mississippi Gift Company. 300 Howard Street. 800-467-7763.
www.themississippigiftcompany.com

All over Mississippi, artists and cooks have turned regionally inspired creations into mini–cottage industries—from pottery to pickles. Some of the best examples can be found inside this fun-to-browse store, with a particularly heavy selection of artfully packaged pecans and nut mixes, cheese and dessert straws, and southern-flavored condiments like fried green tomato salsa and muscadine hot pepper jelly. Popular Delta restaurants like Doe's and Lusco's sell lines of sauces and seasonings there. The gift shop's refrigerator case boasts desserts including the much-ballyhooed Delta Delicacy Cakes fresh baked by two schoolteachers in Money, Mississippi, just across the Tallahatchie Bridge. These homemaker-chic layer cakes come in three flavors—caramel, chocolate, and strawberry: simple, old-fashioned, homespun goodness.

★ **Turnrow Book Company / Café.** 304 Howard Street. 662-453-5995.
turnrowbooks.com

Jamie and Kelly Kornegay are passionate about southern literature—that's obvious from the moment you enter their spacious bookstore in the old Fountain Department Store and see the prominent displays of Faulkner, Welty, and Grisham. They're just as serious about food. Aside from their extensive collection of thoughtfully chosen national and regional cookbook titles, they sponsor a culinary book club with first editions and signed copies for collectors. Many of their ongoing book signings and events revolve around high-profile visiting cookbook authors like French Laundry chef Thomas Keller and former *Gourmet* magazine editor-in-chief Ruth Reichl. As with other Viking properties, it's a sophisticated, airy space, with glossy wood floors topped with Persian rugs and with chandeliers hanging from its two-stories-tall ceiling. They also have a wonderful little coffee shop and café on the balcony-like mezzanine, with salads, sandwiches on artisanal bread, and homemade soups that change daily. (Pimento cheese on grilled ciabatta with a cup of tomato soup is an excellent combo.) It's also a regular meeting spot for iced tea–drinking, bridge-playing ladies. Turnrow sells beer, too.

11 HUMPHREYS COUNTY

The Catfish Capital

CATFISH is the undisputed king in Belzoni.

Images of this bottom feeder-turned-restaurant staple are everywhere. Wildly painted fiberglass mudcats pose in front of businesses all over downtown. A whale-size catfish sculpture rests in a shallow pond near the Catfish Capitol, a museum and visitors center. Smaller iron replicas of catfish appear to leap from the rectangular pool on the spacious lawn in front of the Humphreys County Courthouse.

Catfish mania peaks in April during the World Catfish Festival, when 20,000 people cram into this town of 2,500 near the Yazoo River. Bands blare oldies rock, a Catfish Queen is crowned, spectators cheer on the catfish-eating contestants, and volunteers dish up hundreds of plates of catfish and hush puppies straight out of the massive fryers set up in the parking lot of an auto repair shop.

The first festival dates to 1976, when Governor Cliff Finch proclaimed Belzoni the "Farm-Raised Catfish Capital of the World." Some of the industry's first ponds had been built there in the mid-1960s, and within a decade Humphreys County had become the top catfish producer in the United

States. Competition from abroad and rising feed costs have slowed Delta production considerably, but the benefits of those catfish dollars are clear in this town named for eighteenth-century circus showman Giovanni Battista Belzoni. (The wealthy planter who actually founded it, Alvarez Fisk, was a fan.) At one time the settlement was called Greasy Row, for the straggle of saloons that once lined its riverbanks.

The community prides itself on its collective green thumb, and it shows in the landscaping all around. Wister Gardens, seven miles north of the city, is the site of numerous weddings, wine-and-cheese fund-raisers, and cooking demonstrations. Also in the downtown area is a small museum housing artifacts from the Indian mounds of the Jaketown site a few miles north of Belzoni on Highway 7. In a residential area near the business district, Mama's Dream World offers tours by appointment of the home of Ethel Mohamed Wright, called the Grandma Moses of Stitchery. Her intricate embroidered illustrations of rural Delta life are featured at the Smithsonian Institution.

★ **The Varsity.** 601 Hayden Street. 662-247-1413.

A handwritten sign affixed to the take-out window of this dingy blue-and-white dairy bar downtown reads "Pig Stand Biscuits Sold Here." For nearly thirty-five years, the Pig Stand, a squat red cinder-block building in another location on Highway 49, packed in Belzoni residents hungry for barbecue, steak baskets, sausage biscuits, ice cream, and a never-ending supply of gossip. After Earl and Lawana Kilpatrick sold the property in 1999, the building was torn down and a McDonald's appeared in its place. The Varsity, in operation for more than fifty years, is now owned by the Kilpatricks' offspring and does what it can to preserve the memory of its former competition. Besides dispensing soft-serve ice cream and selling the usual burgers, barbecue, and plate lunches, they deep-fry squares of commercially prepared biscuit dough that mimic the sinfully rich deep-fried ones the Pig Stand used to sell. Also on their menu is another Pig Stand favorite: the "Sutt's Special," named for a regular customer, James "Sutt" Sudduth, who ran a tractor company. This breakfast alternative to the Egg McMuffin is not for the faint of heart—it's an omelet with ham, bacon, lettuce, and tomato on a jumbo mayonnaise-slathered bun.

In a town where independent restaurants and businesses struggle harder than ever to compete with chains, these simple homages to the café society of a former era are appreciated more than ever.

HOOVER SAUCE

★ **Lee Hong Grocery.** 1294 Main Street. Louise. 662-836-5131.

Lee Hong Grocery is one of the few surviving businesses in downtown Louise (population: 300). Farmers regularly stop in for snacks, cigarettes, or maybe a bottle of Colt 45. But now and then, culinary-minded tourists will make a special trip here, hoping to score a bottle of Hoover Sauce.

This salty-sweet, soy sauce–based elixir has had a cult following ever since *Garden and Gun* magazine wrote about it several years back. Nowadays, its creator, Hoover Lee, can often be found in his general store, packaging orders for Hoover Sauce from as far away as France and Hawaii.

He mixes it himself in a back room. Not even Hoover's wife, Freeda, who runs the cash register, or his children, who now own the business, are privy to the formula.

When Hoover invented the sauce in the 1970s, he was just trying to duplicate his mother's Cantonese duck marinade for a potluck dinner. He experimented until he arrived at a taste that he thought was a pretty good approximation. At area social events Hoover would slather the sauce on meat he was grilling. Friends would request a jar or two, and he would oblige. Finally, people began asking where they could find "Hoover Sauce." He's been selling it in his store ever since and will ship it by request.

Hoover Sauce has trickled into several gift stores and gourmet delis, but the creator has no desire to expand his business beyond that. "Not at my age," says Hoover, now well in his seventies. He moved with his family to Louise from the Canton province of China in 1934 as a baby.

"Before the 1950s, big farms had their own little stores," Hoover says, explaining that the average store had five employees, each assigned to various areas: meat, grains, candy, etc. "Lee Hong Company employed blacks. The other store [in town] was all white."

At that time, Chinese in the Delta were required to attend Chinese-only schools. But Louise had so few Chinese that the white grammar and high schools made an exception for Hoover.

"Papa thought it was going to be rough, but I made a lot of friends," he said. "I have always had an ability to know people by their full name."

Hoover earned a degree from Mississippi State's business school and served a few years in the army; Freeda, who grew up in Ruleville, studied accounting at Mississippi State College for Women—the "W." They married and lived in Arkansas, Indiana, and Georgia until Hoover's father asked him to come back to run the store.

"Chinese tradition is to keep the business in your family," he said.

But as economic opportunities in the Delta fizzled, so did most of the other Chinese-operated stores that had once flourished in the region. The Lees are now the only Chinese family in town.

And despite the popularity of Hoover sauce, the Lees' customers have shown little interest in expanding their gastronomic horizons to encompass other Asian flavors.

"The only other Chinese food we sell here is water chestnuts," said Lee.

PICTURE MEMORIES FROM A FOLK ART TRADITION

★ Mama's Dream World: The Ethel Wright Mohamed Stitchery Museum.

307 Central. 662-247-3633; 662-247-1433. (Open by appointment.)

Folk art curators have called Ethel Wright Mohamed "Mississippi's Grandma Moses of Stitchery." Many of her embroidered "picture memories" now reside at the Smithsonian Institution and other national and regional museums.

The rest hang inside Mama's Dream World, a charming white clapboard house a few blocks from downtown Belzoni where Mohamed and her husband, Hassan, raised eight children. A few of those children and grandchildren guide tours of the antique-filled rooms, where nearly every inch of wall space is occupied by family portraits or Mohamed's colorful embroidered artwork.

Ethel Wright never aspired to being an artist—let alone a famous one. She was born in 1906 in Fame, a hill country hamlet she described as "about the size of a bird's nest." Her father, Elijah, was a blacksmith and trader as well as farmer; mother Nina was a gifted quilter and embroiderer. As a young woman, Ethel worked in a bakery, where she met a traveling salesman named Hassan Mohamed. He began courting her the old-fashioned way, by coming to her house as a Sunday dinner guest and engaging her father in long conversations afterward. Eventually Hassan asked Elijah for permission to marry his daughter. A devout Christian, Elijah was reluctant at first; Hassan, who had emigrated from Lebanon, was Muslim. But Hassan managed to persuade him that he would be a good provider for his daughter, and in 1924 Ethel and Hassan married.

When Hassan died in 1965, to assuage her grief Ethel turned to the handwork she had enjoyed since childhood. Instead of following the old patterns, she made up her own—based on family recollections and her husband's vivid stories.

"With her needles and threads and the paper towel roll she used as a pin cushion, Mama used to say she had her night life," daughter Carol Ivy recalled.

At first, Mohamed showed her pictures only to her children, as conversation pieces for events she wanted to remember: *Buddy Getting the Figs Picked*, *Family Night at the Crescent Theater*, *Waiting for the Stork*.

In the early 1970s, a team from the Smithsonian scouting the country for local artisans to participate in the museum's 1974 Festival of American Folklife discovered Mohamed's unique artwork. She attended the event showcasing some of her work in Washington, D.C., and donated a tapestry depicting the festival that served as the program cover for the 1976 Bicentennial Folklife Festival. It's now in the Smithsonian's permanent collection, along with some of her other works.

She never sold one of her pictures, she said, because "I love them too much. But I love to show and share them with others."

Since Mohamed's death in 1992, her family has honored her wishes by showing her work and telling the family stories they depict, and while the tapestries aren't for sale, you can buy prints of them and a lovely book, *My Life in Pictures*, with photographs of her work and captions in Mohamed's own words, in the museum.

Mohamed Family Favorite Kibbee

Many of Ethel Wright Mohamed's needlework stories have revolved around the dinner table and feasts incorporating both Lebanese and Delta favorites. Mohamed—"Big Mama" to her grandchildren—would make cabbage rolls stuffed with ground beef and simmered in tomato sauce and stock made from beef bones. She was also known for her gigantic "wet salads." As granddaughter Amy Hawkins remembers it, "She would rub a big wooden salad bowl with a cut clove of garlic and then fill the bowl with lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and green onions. Then she would dress it with lemon juice and olive oil. It would be reeking of garlic."

Kibbee was her Lebanese husband Hassan's specialty. "Daddy would take the very best steak, that he would grind himself," daughter Carol Ivy remembers. "He would soak number-one-grind wheat and mix it with onions, salt, and pepper and form it into balls, then bake it or fry it. Mama would put it in a pan and bake it, but I always liked it fried."

Mohamed's son Joseph "Bubba" Mohamed, who owned a store in Inverness, continued his father's tradition and contributed that kibbee recipe to a local cookbook called *The Share-Cropper*, put out by Central Delta Academy PTA of Inverness. It later appeared in *A Gracious Plenty*, John T. Edge's compilation of southern community cookbook recipes. This is a slight adaptation.

"Bubba Warming His Feet"

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

1 cup cracked wheat (bulgur)
1 pound lean round steak, ground twice
1 large yellow onion, pureed
½ cup vegetable or olive oil
1 teaspoon salt, or to taste
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
Chopped parsley, mint, and olives, for garnish
Vegetable oil for pan-frying (optional)

In a large bowl, soak the wheat in cold water until it swells, about 45 minutes. Squeeze the excess water out with your hands or in a tea towel. Place the wheat in a bowl, add the meat, onion, oil, salt, and pepper; mix well.

The kibbee can be pan-fried, deep-fried, baked, or most traditionally of all, molded and served raw. To pan-fry it, form the meat mixture into patties. Pour oil into a large skillet to a depth of ½ inch and heat it over medium-high heat. Fry the kibbee until cooked through and golden brown. To deep-fry it, form the meat mixture into football-shaped balls that are about 3 inches long. Pour oil into a deep, heavy pot to a depth of 3 inches and heat it to 360°F. Lower the kibbee into the hot oil and fry until they are cooked through and golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes. To bake it, preheat the oven to 375°F. Press the meat mixture into a 9-inch-square pan. Bake until cooked through and golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes. Serve garnished with parsley, mint, and olives.

Yazoo MARKET

12 YAZOO CITY

Half Hills and Half Delta

IN HIS 1967 MEMOIR *North toward Home*, Willie Morris succinctly describes Yazoo City, the town where he grew up: "half hills and half delta, only forty miles from the Mississippi, as the crow flies." When you see the giant clouds billowing from the smokestacks of the fertilizer plant along Highway 49, you know you're getting close.

While Mississippi Chemical Corporation has been integral to the area's economy, its less-than-picturesque presence has undoubtedly kept more than a few passersby from ever seeing the more charming parts of this city.

Straddling two vastly different terrains, with industries that include oil and cattle in addition to cotton and catfish, Yazoo City is at once white-collar and blue-collar, genteel and hardscrabble. With a population of fourteen thousand, Yazoo City is the seat of Yazoo County, Mississippi's largest. The Yazoo River, a tributary of the Mississippi, flows hard by both. French explorer Robert LaSalle in 1682 discovered a small tribe of Indians called the Yazoo living near the river's mouth. Linguists have studied Choctaw language patterns to figure out what "Yazoo" meant, but it is most often translated "River of Death."

The name certainly fit in the beginning. Infested with disease-carrying mosquitoes and venomous snakes, the Yazoo River claimed untold numbers of the settlers who paddled into port with dreams of cotton fortunes only to succumb to yellow fever or some violent encounter with man or beast. Underwater mines planted during the Civil War by the Confederates sunk dozens of federal ships, including the USS *Baron DeKalb*, whose hull can still be spotted not far from Yazoo City when the water's low.

Willie Morris perpetuates the Yazoo's deadly reputation in his autobiography, *Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood*, with a harrowing account of the legend of the Witch of Yazoo City. He tells how "a mean and ugly old woman" who lived alone on the riverbank in the late 1800s would lure fishermen into her house and poison them with arsenic. The law eventually found out and the sheriff chased her through the swamp until she became trapped in quicksand. As she sank to her death, she threatened to break out of her grave and burn down the town on May 25, 1904. The townsfolk wrapped her coffin in heavy chains before burying her in Glenwood Cemetery downtown. But on the date she'd promised to get her revenge, flames engulfed most of the city, destroying many of its beautiful old homes. (The fire was actually started by a boy playing with matches, but the myth of the spiteful witch persists.)

Morris is buried—per his request—exactly thirteen steps from the grave of the Witch of Yazoo City. The site remains one of the city's most visited attractions, especially around Halloween, and a popular field trip for local schoolchildren.

The cemetery is part of downtown Yazoo City's Triangle Cultural Center, which includes Mississippi's oldest library; a literary walkway with names of writers from Yazoo County; and the Sam B. Olden Yazoo Historical Society Museum, featuring memorabilia from the 1904 fire, the Great Flood of 1927, the train wreck immortalized in "The Ballad of Casey Jones," and other local events. The museum also pays homage to Morris and other native sons and daughters: comedian Jerry Clower, actress Stella Stevens, Mississippi governor Haley Barbour, NFL Hall of Famer Willie Brown, and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar.

About fifteen miles southeast of Yazoo City toward Jackson, blues tourists often make a pilgrimage to Bentonia, where a Mississippi Blues Trail marker stands in front of a humble storefront with Coca-Cola signs called **The Blue Front Café**. Opened in 1948 by an African American couple named

Carey and Mary Holmes, it attracted field workers who came there for buffalo fish, moonshine, haircuts, and entertainment. A distinctive style of blues music took root there, characterized by minor guitar chords and droning strings. One of its practitioners is Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, who today runs his parents' store as a juke joint where he sometimes performs, along with other blues artists. It has in recent years been the site of the **Bentonia Blues Festival** held in mid-June, with concerts, food, and games.

Though Yazoo City is not a culinary destination, there are a handful of unpretentious places where you can enjoy a nice steak, a serious barbecue sandwich, or a classic southern meringue-topped pie and be guaranteed a generous helping of local color to go with it.

★ **Ubon's.** 801 North Jerry Clower Boulevard. 662-716-7100.

A competitive streak clearly runs in the Roark family. Witness the wall-to-wall trophies that decorate their white frame barbecue restaurant on U.S. 49.

In 1989 Garry and Elaine Roark joined the Memphis in May World BBQ Competition circuit with a backyard grill and a borrowed funeral home tent in hopes of spreading the word about the five-generations-old family barbecue sauce recipe they'd just begun bottling for sale. Turns out, they had more fun than they ever imagined. And so, with several friends, they formed the Ubon's BBQ of Yazoo Cooking Team.

Since then they've upgraded to a sixteen-foot barbecue trailer and racked up more first places and grand championships than they can count. In 2004 they opened a restaurant specializing in "Memphis Championship Barbecue."

"We use the same smoker out back as the ones on the trailers we tour with," says Garry and Elaine's daughter, Leslie Roark Scott, who devises recipes for the restaurant. The menu covers the Memphis-style pork basics: pulled-pork sandwiches, wet and dry ribs, barbecued sausages. Plus, they do a serious beef brisket and chicken. They smoke their pork butts and briskets at two hundred degrees for eighteen hours over charcoal and hardwood.

That legendary peppery-sweet sauce is even used by other cook-off teams and is sold in the restaurant, along with a signature marinade, dipping sauce, and rub.

★ **Yazoo Market.** 1309 East Broadway Street. 662-716-0505.

Tom Johnson didn't plan to open a café when he bought the vacant filling station along this busy highway heading into downtown Yazoo City. He just needed a home for his tomatoes. But one thing led to another, and Yazoo Market is now a produce stand, coffee shop, take-out place, bakery, gourmet market, convenience store, and community hub.

The seeds were planted when Johnson, a former state legislator who had made his living growing cotton and corn, switched crops. He put in five thousand tomato plants and wholesaled what he harvested. Then he set up a little retail market in his newly acquired building and supplemented his tomatoes with other produce. As business grew, Johnson recruited his wife, Nita, and some local home cooks to prepare breakfast, hot lunches, and sandwiches.

Yazoo Market is an exceedingly cheerful place. The open kitchen is painted bright green. On the counter you might find a basket of mums and a tiered dessert stand with slices of chocolate chess pie. Near the kitchen are well-stocked bins and refrigerator cases with carefully selected produce from "as close as we could get it," Tom says.

In the summertime, that likely means corn from Indianola, watermelons and okra from Smith County south of Jackson, field peas and butter beans from South Texas, and blueberries from "a local lady" with a few berry bushes in her yard. Fall brings sweet potatoes from northeast Mississippi, and come spring, there are strawberries from just across the state line in Louisiana (to mark their arrival, strawberry shortcake headlines the menu).

Plate lunches at Yazoo Market might include grilled pork tenderloin and butter beans one day, turkey with cornbread dressing the next. The market also sells tamales from Hot Tamale Heaven in Greenville. The refrigerator section brims with plastic and foil containers filled with everything from the Lebanese meat croquettes called kibbee, to chicken tetrazzini, to deviled eggs, to banana pudding. The dry goods shelves are equably eclectic, with pickled ginger for sushi and Japanese panko crumbs alongside Steen's syrup and fig preserves.

Yazoo Market Chocolate Chess Pie

This simple Delta favorite has a brownie-like filling and comes topped with whipped cream, ice cream, or meringue—or with nothing to gild the lily.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

1½ cups sugar
3½ tablespoons cocoa powder
¼ pound (1 stick) butter, melted
⅔ cup evaporated milk
2 large eggs, beaten
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
1 unbaked 9-inch pie shell
Whipped cream or vanilla ice cream, for serving (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a large bowl, mix together the sugar and cocoa. Stir in the melted butter, evaporated milk, eggs, and vanilla. Pour into the pie shell and bake until the filling is nearly set with a slightly jiggly center, about 45 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature. This is great with whipped cream or ice cream.

"People eat what they know," Nita says. "When I first started making shrimp and grits, people had never heard of it and would say, 'You eat grits for *breakfast*.' Now it's become one of our top sellers."

MORE LOCAL FLAVOR

★ **Ribeyes.** 70 Old Benton Road. 662-746-4811.

With a local history that goes back more than sixty years, this popular gathering spot for grilled steaks, oysters on the half-shell, cold beer, and big-screen football got some unintentional national publicity in 2010 when a deadly tornado ripped it to shreds, making for some dramatic photos and television news footage. But Mitchell Saxton, who bought it in 2005, quickly went to work rebuilding it, and a few months later it reopened bigger than ever.

★ **Stub's.** 1902 Jerry Clower Boulevard. 662-746-1204.

To get an idea of Yazoo City's religious demarcations, stop in at Stub's for Sunday lunch and watch the crowd of churchgoers pour in: "The Catholics come first, then the Methodists, then the Baptists," explained one lifelong resident. This cafeteria-style meat-and-three, located on the main drag,

has been dishing out home-cooked southern fare since 1961. Willie Morris was a frequent patron. Fried chicken, catfish, barbecue, chicken livers, and vegetables cooked until well wilted are staples. But what this cavernous place is most known for are the desserts: banana pudding, pecan pie, and—most of all—the chocolate chess pie.

★ **The Pig Shack.** 1427 East Broadway. 662-746-2005.

The Pig Shack is a tiny, unpainted wood structure with a covered patio and a few picnic tables. Jana Trillet, who mastered barbecue and all manner of country cooking growing up in Arkansas, now runs the business, which was started in the 1990s by a pig farmer from Benton. One bite of her pulled-pork sandwich is evidence she's found her calling; the meat is tender and pleasantly smoky, complimented with a darkly sweet sauce. She also smokes hams and turkeys to order and sells plastic bags of light and crunchy pork rinds she fries herself. Those pork rinds alone are worth a stop.

MISSISSIPPI CHEESE STRAWS

★ **Mississippi Cheese Straw Factory.** 1-800-530-7496. (Available by mail order and in select markets.) www.mscheesestraws.com

Time was when a southern belle's hostess skills could be measured, in part, by the quality of her cheese straws. Then along came Mary Yerger to shoulder that responsibility. Though by no means the only southern cook who has turned cheese straws into a cottage industry, she's certainly among the most successful. Early on, Yerger's addictive, finger-size savory pastries were a particular hit with her Yazoo City clients. With the help of sons Hunter and Robbie, she graduated to larger-scale production, and soon area gourmet shops were selling her straws.

Their popularity grew, and now Mississippi Cheese Straw Factory wares are sold in stores throughout the South and by mail order.

Yerger has long since retired, but Hunter and Robbie remain in charge. They have expanded the line to include sweet pastry straws in flavors including lemon, cinnamon-pecan, pineapple-coconut, and Elvis Peanut Butter Banana. They also do a party mix called Trailer Trash and cookies called Mud Puppies—so named because of their hush puppy–like size and shape.

Crispy Cheese Wafers

A classic Delta cheese straw, writes Julia Reed, bears no resemblance to the "ubiquitous and tasteless" Parmesan-dusted puff pastry twists passed off as cheese straws in gourmet shops throughout Manhattan. Rather, they are "ridged rectangular wafers made of the heavenly combination of Cheddar, butter, flour, and cayenne pepper that melts in your mouth and is best made with an old-fashioned cookie press. They're crunchy in texture, sharp in flavor; there is almost nothing I would rather eat."

Recipes for cheese straws abound in the Delta. In *Ham Biscuits, Hostess Gowns, and Other Southern Specialties,* Reed includes her favorite version, which mostly follows the basic formula found all over the Deep South, except that it uses freshly grated Parmesan in place of some of the Cheddar.

Virtually every Delta community cookbook has at least one cheese straw recipe and typically some type of cheese wafer recipe that uses the same ingredients but does not require a cookie press. These addictive and easy to make little morsels are both crunchy and light, thanks to the addition of Rice Krispies cereal.

MAKES 4 DOZEN

½ pound grated extra-sharp Cheddar cheese (2 cups)
½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
2 cups all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 cups crispy rice cereal

Preheat oven to 375°F. Position 2 racks in middle and lower thirds of oven. In a large mixing bowl, beat together the cheese and butter on medium speed until blended. Add flour, salt, and cayenne pepper and beat until dough holds together. Add cereal; stir with a wooden spoon to combine. Roll into 1-inch balls. Place on baking sheets and press with a fork to form a crosshatch. Place two sheets in the oven at a time and bake 12 to 15 minutes until crispy and golden.

JERRY CLOWER: "THE MOUTH OF THE SOUTH"

★ **THE STRETCH OF HIGHWAY 49** through Yazoo City is named for a fertilizer salesman renowned for his tall tales and facility in imitating chain saws.

Jerry Clower grew up dirt-poor in the 1930s on a small farm in Amite County, near the Louisiana line. A football scholarship helped pay for his agronomy degree from Mississippi State. But it was his knack for turning memories of country-boy antics into knee-slappers that made him a hit with customers at Mississippi Chemical Corporation in Yazoo City.

He started receiving invitations to speak at farm-industry conventions, regaling audiences with tales of playing 'gator in the swimming hole and feeding buckets of boiled okra to coon dogs. People told him he should record his stories, and in 1971 he cut his first album, *Jerry Clower from Yazoo City, Mississippi, Talkin'*. It sold half a million copies in its first month. Within two years he was a Grand Ole Opry regular and a frequent guest on TV variety shows. During his career as an entertainer he wrote four best-selling books and recorded twenty-eight albums.

Yet despite his success, Clower never wavered in his devotion to family, heritage, and home cooking. He counted helping his wife, Homerline, tote covered dishes to the church fellowship hall a highlight of each month. "I'd rather go down there and take the lids off of them dishes and dip up that chicken pie and fellowship with them folks than to drink tea with the Queen of England," he once remarked.

Clower died in 1998 and is buried in nearby Liberty. Yazoo City holds a Jerry Clower Festival each spring, and his widow offers tours of the Jerry Clower Private Museum, near their home, where his prized stuffed raccoon collection, football jerseys, and gold records are on display.

In the late 1980s, Murphy Givens, then a reporter for the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, interviewed Clower and snagged a recipe for his mama's tea cakes, a special favorite of Clower's.

Crisp-edged, buttery-rich, and fragrant with vanilla, they are an excellent example of a simple baked treat that's a favorite around here.

Mama Clower's Tea Cakes

MAKES ABOUT 3 DOZEN

3 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
½ pound (2 sticks) butter, at room temperature
1½ cups sugar, divided
2 large eggs
3 tablespoons buttermilk
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly grease several cookie sheets.

In a medium bowl, sift or whisk together the flour, baking soda, and salt. In a large bowl, beat the butter and 1¼ cups of the sugar with an electric mixer set to high speed until light and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating on high speed until fluffy. Beat in the buttermilk and vanilla. Reduce the mixer speed to low and gradually add the flour mixture, scraping down the side of the bowl as needed. Beat only until incorporated, taking care not to overmix.

Place the remaining ¼ cup of sugar in a small bowl. Gently roll the dough into 1-inch balls and place them about 3 inches apart on the lightly greased cookie sheets. Use the bottom of a drinking glass dipped into the small bowl of sugar to slightly flatten the cookies. Bake until the edges are golden brown, 8 to 13 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool to room temperature.

13 VICKSBURG

Red Carpet City of the South

THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA ends in a little city high on a bluff where a battle that changed the fate of a nation was fought.

Vicksburg (population: 25,000) bears little resemblance to the downtrodden towns that dot the alluvial plain upriver. The terrain is rolling and steep. Antebellum mansions—notably absent elsewhere in the Delta—stand regally behind terraced lawns.

Settled in the early 1800s, Vicksburg quickly developed into a busy port and center of agriculture and commerce. It suffers economically like the rest of the Delta, but its long-established tourism industry provides a considerable edge. The brick-paved segment of Highway 61 that cuts through its downtown area—also known as Washington Street—bustles with business folk, conventioneers, and sightseers, many drifting up from the gargantuan riverboat casinos docked at the foot of the hill. Cafés and shops beckon along sidewalks lined with gas lamps.

Catfish Row, on the waterfront, provides a quick, colorful sketch of this river town's past. Once a poor enclave, it's now a beautifully landscaped park with a children's play area and splash fountain, paved trails, and thirty-two billboard-size murals depicting scenes from Vicksburg's history.

One shows pioneers congregated around a log church erected by Newit Vick, the Methodist minister for whom the city is named. Another recalls the elaborate Christmas display that was an annual tradition of the beloved and bygone Koestler's Bakery a century and a half later.

What is not among these heartening panoramas are the intense battle scenes of the Siege of Vicksburg, the most significant episode in the city's history. Widely viewed as the turning point in the Civil War, the battle is documented extensively at Vicksburg National Military Park and in several local museums, including the artifact-filled 1858 Old Court House.

Vicksburg's location on the Mississippi made it essential to General Ulysses S. Grant's strategy for gaining control of the river and clear passage southward, but the city proved to be a thorny obstacle. Shrouded by swamps and bayous to the north and south and heavily protected by batteries and forts, it earned the nickname "the Gibraltar of the South."

When a series of assaults on the city failed, Grant called for a formal siege. For forty-seven days, artillery shells pummeled homes and businesses, forcing civilians to flee to caves dug out of the hillside and subsist on rats and cornmeal mush.

By the time the city surrendered on July 4, 1863, the landscape was drenched in the blood of nearly twenty thousand soldiers and countless civilians. The capture of Vicksburg and Port Hudson, Louisiana, gave control of the river to the Union and split the Confederacy in two. Vicksburg struggled in the aftermath, first as an occupied city while the war dragged on for two more years, and then through the rigors of Reconstruction. But over time, the city rebounded. The levee system was rebuilt and the steamboat industry reborn.

As much as the city reveres its past, a progressive spirit is palpable. On Saturdays during warmer months, a small farmers market sets up by the riverfront mural, where a handful of local farmers share table space next to artisanal bakers and craftsmen. The Highway 61 Coffeehouse draws a steady crowd not only for the frothy cappuccinos and pastries but also for live blues and the folk art gallery upstairs.

Authentic local fare here goes beyond the standard meat-and-threes, catfish houses, and tamale joints you find throughout the region. Bartenders can mix you a mint julep. Tomato aspic is a lunch-menu option. Owners of many of those stately antebellum residences will rent you an immaculately appointed room and feed you a full-fledged, plantation-style breakfast with cheese grits and fresh-baked biscuits.

BED, BREAKFAST, AND MORE

More than a dozen of Vicksburg's grand old residences are restored and open to visitors. April brings the Tapestry pilgrimage, with a score or more of the jaw-dropping places open to the public and guides dressed in antebellum regalia telling the stories of Vicksburg's early years. Many of the old homes also function as inns; a few have restaurants. All have colorful stories to tell, including these three.

★ **Baer House Mansion and Inn.** 601-883-1525; 866-510-1525.
www.baerhouseinn.ms

Leona Baer was a woman of very particular tastes. No one knew that better than her husband, Lazarus, owner of a Vicksburg dry goods store, who'd promised to build the house of her dreams.

Leona chose an ornate style known as Eastlake Victorian, which was just becoming popular among America's gentry. She longed to impress guests with such architectural details as modillion cornices, carved verge boards, and fish scale shingles and presided over the home's construction to ensure it lived up to her specifications. It would ultimately have eleven fireplaces and a two-story indoor privy.

The red brick mansion was completed in 1870 and is now a bed-and-breakfast with seven guest rooms. Innkeeper Doug Cousineau serves full breakfasts in the pomegranate-colored formal ballroom adorned with three Austrian crystal chandeliers and period antiques. A native of Oregon, Cousineau was nonetheless quick to master the full traditional southern breakfast, complete with biscuits, ham, and slow-cooked stone-ground grits. But often he brings out one of his own specialties, like crème brûlée "Italian" toast (actually it's French toast, but made with Italian bread). A bit like a bread pudding soufflé, it's served in squares atop a floral-patterned china plate, garnished with pecans, and dusted with powdered sugar, alongside sausage or bacon.

"When I first opened the inn, a friend gave me this recipe, and it was adapted to be made the night before," said Cousineau. "It makes things easy for me in the morning."

He starts guests off with coffee and fruit salad or a parfait of granola, fruit, and yogurt. After he has brought out the main course, he delivers an entertaining spiel about the house's history and the colorful family that occupied it.

Baer House Inn Crème Brûlée Italian Toast

Something of a cross between bread pudding and French toast, this popular breakfast dish is sometimes garnished with pecans gathered from the trees in the front yard.

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

¼ pound (1 stick) unsalted butter
1 cup packed brown sugar
2 tablespoons corn syrup
1½ cups chopped pecans
1 loaf Italian bread, 6 to 7 inches in diameter
5 large eggs
1½ cups half-and-half
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon Grand Marnier, or to taste
Confectioners' sugar, for sprinkling on top

In a small, heavy saucepan, melt the butter with the brown sugar and corn syrup over medium heat, stirring until smooth. Pour into a 13-by-9-by-2-inch glass baking dish. Sprinkle the pecans evenly over the mixture.

Cut eight 1-inch-thick slices from the center portion of the bread loaf, reserving the ends for another use. Trim off the crusts. Arrange the bread slices in one layer in the baking dish, squeezing them in slightly to fit.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the eggs, half-and-half, vanilla, salt, and Grand Marnier until well-combined. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Bring the bread mixture to room temperature. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Bake until firm and lightly golden on top, about 40 minutes. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar, cut into squares, and serve warm.

A WARTIME COMBO, REINVENTED

★ **BESIDES THE CANNONS ON THE LAWN,** the other thing you can't miss when you pull into the Battlefield Inn parking lot is the hulking gunboat that houses the Vicksburg Battlefield Museum. The museum's motto: Not politically correct, but historically accurate.

Exhibits depict the forty-seven-day Siege of Vicksburg with battlefield dioramas, a huge collection of gunboat models, and a thirty-minute wide-screen film presentation called *Vanishing Glory*, in which stories of soldiers and civilians are told through voice-over excerpts from letters and diaries. Women and children describe dodging shells, going for weeks without a change of clothes, and living on a diet of rats and a gruel made of cornmeal and dried peas.

With better times, the cornmeal and black-eyed pea combination has resurfaced in much tastier forms, like black-eyed pea cornbread, which appears in several Vicksburg cookbooks and often turns up at parties. It may be cut in big squares and served as a side dish or light main dish, or into bite-size pieces, topped with salsa and sour cream, as cocktail fare.

Black-Eyed Pea Cornbread

This recipe is adapted from *Ambrosia: A Deep South Mixture of Homes, Recipes, and History* published by the Junior Auxiliary of Vicksburg, Mississippi (1997).

Some versions call for breakfast sausage in place of the beef.

MAKES 8 TO 12 SERVINGS

1 pound ground beef
½ teaspoon salt, or to taste
1 cup cornmeal
½ cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
2 large eggs, slightly beaten
1 cup buttermilk
½ cup vegetable oil
½ pound sharp Cheddar cheese, grated (2 cups)
1 large onion, chopped
¾ cup cream-style corn
1 (15.5-ounce) can black-eyed peas seasoned with pork, undrained
2 tablespoons finely chopped pickled jalapeño chile
Salsa, for serving (optional)
Sour cream, for serving (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-by-13-by-2-inch baking pan.

In a large skillet, brown the ground beef over medium-high heat. Drain and season with salt.

In a large bowl, stir together the cornmeal, flour, and baking soda. In a small bowl, beat together the eggs, buttermilk, and oil; stir into the cornmeal mixture. Fold in the cooked beef, cheese, onion, corn, peas, and the jalapeño. Pour into the prepared pan. Bake for 45 minutes. Let cool about 15 minutes before cutting. Top each square with salsa and a dab of sour cream, if desired.

★ **Cedar Grove Mansion Inn, Restaurant, and Bar.** 2200 Oak Street. 601-636-1000; 800-862-1300. www.cedargroveinn.com

Of all the restored antebellum homes in Vicksburg, Cedar Grove Mansion is arguably the grandest. On a bluff overlooking the Yazoo River in the city's garden district, this Greek Revival home with white columns and multiple verandas is now one of the South's largest bed-and-breakfasts. Besides thirty-three luxury rooms, it has a fancy restaurant, a handsome bar, and five acres of gazebo gardens that have seen many a wedding.

It also has a love story of its own. John Alexander Klein was an architect and jeweler who made a fortune in cotton, lumber, and banking before he turned thirty. In the 1840s he began building Cedar Grove Hall as a wedding present for his beloved, Elizabeth Bartley Day, who was kin to a certain William T. Sherman. The newlyweds spent a year's honeymoon in Europe, collecting Italian marble fireplaces, French empire gasoliers, and other elaborate furnishings for their new home.

John went to war to fight for the Confederacy. When Cedar Grove was struck by Union shells, Sherman moved Elizabeth, who was pregnant, to a safe place to give birth. He also turned Cedar Grove into a hospital for Union soldiers, thus sparing it further harm. John returned home safely, and the Kleins had ten children in all. The family continued to live at Cedar Grove until 1919.

Rhett Butler

MAKES 1 COCKTAIL

Ice cubes
½ ounce sweet vermouth
½ ounce simple syrup (see note)
½ ounce fresh lemon juice
1 to 2 ounces Southern Comfort
Splash of club soda
1 maraschino cherry
1 lemon slice
1 teaspoon pineapple juice

Fill an old-fashioned glass with ice cubes. Add the sweet vermouth, simple syrup, and lemon juice. Add the Southern Comfort and club soda. Stir. Drop in the cherry and the lemon slice. Float the pineapple juice on top. ("Just let it roll off your spoon," explains Connor).

How to make simple syrup: In a small saucepan, bring 1 part water to a boil. Dissolve 2 parts sugar in the boiling water, stirring constantly. Remove from the heat, transfer into a bottle, seal, and refrigerate for up to 6 months.

Since then, the mansion has had several owners. Many pieces that belonged to the Kleins are still in the home, as is a cannonball that remains lodged in a parlor wall. Guests claim to have seen the ghost of Elizabeth Klein walking up stairs, or heard babies crying in the night, or detected the scent of John Klein's pipe.

There are other ways to get a taste of Cedar Grove without a night's stay. Its restaurant—set in a bricked garden room heavily adorned with potted plants and statuary—serves some of the city's most upscale dinners at night. But like the rest of the estate, the restaurant has changed hands several times and the dining experience can be hard to predict.

Or you can simply pull up to the marble counter inside its cozy, comfortable bar. Joe Connor—"Mr. Joe" to the staff and regulars—is a seasoned mixologist as well as a Vicksburg native. He is a genial presence primed to answer questions about local history and happenings and is especially well versed in blues history. His extensive drinks repertoire includes all the classics and some newfangled martinis, along with a Tara-themed selection.

A LEGACY OF LAVISH ENTERTAINING

☆ **The BB Club / Storycook Favorites.** 721 Clay Street. 601-636-0008.
www.storycookfavorites.com

Story Stamm Ebersole is a caterer, not a tour guide.

But being a gracious southern hostess, she's been known to give curious visitors a peek inside the elegant building at the corner of Clay and Walnut downtown. Everyone in Vicksburg knows it as the BB Club building, after the B'nai B'rith Literary Association, which occupied it for many years.

The building isn't open to the public. But with its striking carved limestone exterior and marble steps and the prominent historical marker out front, it would be easy to mistake it for a museum or another tourist attraction.

B'nai B'rith ("Sons of the Covenant") began in 1886 as a men's investment club made up mostly of German Jews "for the purpose of the intellectual and social advancement of its members." The BB Club building symbolizes the prosperity that built Vicksburg, and the city's vaunted reputation for lavish entertaining. It also represents the prominent position Jews once held throughout the Delta.

In 1967, the city bought the BB Club building, which for the next three decades housed a police station. In 1999, local businessmen bought and restored the edifice, and it's been used ever since for grand parties.

Ebersole's catering company, Storycook Favorites, often prepares the spreads. She and her staff work out of a kitchen in the back of the building, where they also make cheese straws and other gourmet-to-go foods that she sells a few blocks away at Petersons Arts and Antiques.

Ebersole is well versed in Vicksburg's dining preferences. Her mother, Laurin Stamm, worked for the *Vicksburg Post* for sixty years, and for most of that time wrote the popular weekly "Food for Thought" column, in which she profiled local cooks of all backgrounds and ethnicities. She tested her recipes on her husband and five children. Not even the prospect of tasting armadillo deterred oldest daughter Story from wanting to help in the kitchen.

After years of working as a certified public accountant, Story began preparing frozen casseroles like chicken tetrazzini and beef enchiladas for families on the go and gradually expanded her business to include catered spreads.

One hors d'oeuvre that's almost universally requested is Vicksburg Tomato Sandwiches: round finger sandwiches smeared with spicy mayonnaise. It would be sacrilegious to most Vicksburg hosts even to consider omitting them from the buffet table—no matter what the time of day or year.

Vicksburg Tomato Sandwiches

This recipe has run in both *Vintage Vicksburg* and *Ambrosia: A Deep South Mixture of Homes, Recipes and History*, both published by the Junior Auxiliary of Vicksburg. Caterer Story Stamm Ebersole uses Romas when larger good, fresh tomatoes are not to be found; in that case use a smaller cutter and expect to get at least double the sandwiches.

MAKES 36 SANDWICHES

72 slices day-old white sandwich bread (about 4 loaves)
6 to 8 medium tomatoes
Salt and ground black pepper, to taste
Mayonnaise, preferably homemade
1 medium yellow onion, grated, with its juice
Paprika, for dusting

With a large (2- or 3-inch) biscuit cutter, cut the bread slices into 72 rounds.

To peel the tomatoes, bring a large saucepan of water to a boil. Meanwhile, fill a large bowl with ice water. With a small paring knife, score the bottom of each tomato with an X. Using a slotted spoon, dip each tomato into boiling water for 20 to 30 seconds. Immediately transfer into the ice water for another 20 to 30 seconds to cool. With a small paring knife, peel off the skins beginning with the X on the bottom. Thinly slice the tomatoes into a total of 36 slices. Place them on double sheets of paper towels to drain. Salt and pepper the tomato slices.

Spread the mayonnaise on one side of the bread rounds. Place one well-drained tomato slice each on half of the bread rounds and sprinkle again with salt and pepper. Sprinkle ½ teaspoon of the onion with juice over each tomato and top with the remaining bread rounds. Sprinkle the tops with paprika.

The sandwiches can be assembled up to one hour before serving. Place them on a cookie sheet with waxed paper between the layers and over the top. Let sit at room temperature.

★ **Café Anchuca.** 1010 First East Street. 601-661-0111; 888-686-0111. www.anchuca.com

A small balcony hangs over the front door of the daffodil-yellow antebellum mansion called Anchuca, Choctaw for "happy home." Confederate president Jefferson Davis delivered one of his final addresses here while visiting his brother Joseph. Tom Pharr and Chris Brinkley now occupy this oak-shaded Greek Revival home in the historic district. They have meticulously restored that balcony and every square inch of the house inside to its original grandeur, furnishing it with European antiques and artwork spanning three centuries. But beyond that, they've also transformed Anchuca into a comfortable and hospitable seven-room inn and café.

With French doors that look out onto lush gardens and a swimming pool, the relaxed and airy brick-floored dining room buzzes with conviviality at lunch and dinner, but especially on Sundays. That's when guests gather for a plantation-style breakfast, served with a contemporary flair.

Cheese grits, flaky biscuits, elaborate egg and hash brown casseroles, and over-the-top desserts are the specialties of Brinkley's menu. You can

Anchuca Inn Jalapeño-Pimento Cheese Spread

The addition of cream cheese makes Chris Brinkley's pimento cheese smoother and creamier than most, and jalapeño gives it bite. Besides using it for sandwiches, it's also the secret ingredient in his cheese grits, which also include plenty of butter and cream.

MAKES 4 CUPS

1 pound medium or sharp Cheddar cheese
1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, at room temperature
1 cup mayonnaise, plus more as needed
2 tablespoons sliced pickled jalapeño chiles
1 (4-ounce) jar sliced pimentos, drained
2 teaspoons dried dill
½ teaspoon garlic salt
¼ teaspoon ground white pepper

With a box grater or food processor fitted with a grater attachment, grate the Cheddar cheese.

In a food processor fitted with the metal blade, combine the cream cheese, mayonnaise, jalapeños, pimentos, dill, salt, and white pepper; pulse to blend.

Add the grated cheese and pulse until the mixture is mostly smooth with a few visible bits of jalapeño and pimento. If too thick, add a little more mayonnaise. Transfer into a storage container and refrigerate at least 4 hours and preferably overnight. Serve slightly chilled or at room temperature.

also order Belgian waffles, eggs benedict, seafood gumbo, a soup, or perhaps Brinkley's barbecue brisket with homemade sauce.

Brinkley is not a professionally trained chef but an exuberant home cook from Louisiana who draws from family recipes, tattered old southern cookbooks, and his travels around the United States and abroad. He likes unexpected combinations and puts an original spin on just about everything. Sweet onions caramelized with honey and ginger might garnish a tender filet mignon on the dinner menu, for instance, and he ladles his shrimp Creole into an edible bowl molded of cheese grits. Layer cakes are festooned with mascarpone, raspberry sauce, caramel drizzle, cream cheese icing, chocolate ganache, liqueur-spiked whipped cream, or whatever other embellishment he dreams up. He shares the recipes for many of his creations in his *Taste of Anchuca* cookbook, which is for sale in the lobby.

HISTORY IN A BOTTLE

★ **Biedenharn Candy Company / Museum of Coca-Cola.** 1107 Washington Street. 601-638-6514. www.biedenharncoca-colamuseum.com

Atlanta may be the undisputed birthplace of Coca-Cola, but Vicksburg stakes a big claim to the soft drink story. It was here in 1894 that Joseph Biedenharn, a Vicksburg candy merchant and soda fountain operator, figured out how to bottle the soda to ship to rural areas outside his hometown's city limits. His concept would revolutionize the industry, making it possible to distribute soft drinks all over the world.

The Biedenharn family bottled Coca-Cola at its candy store, and several other places in town, until 1938, when a new Coca-Cola plant was built. They sold the original building, which served a variety of commercial purposes for the next several decades. Then, in 1979, the family bought it back, refurbished the candy store to its original appearance, added historic displays, and donated it to the Vicksburg Foundation for Historic Preservation.

Now it's a fun museum in the heart of the shopping and tourism district, where for a few dollars you can see exhibits that include a reproduction of the first bottling equipment, vintage Coca-Cola advertisements, and a history of the Biedenharn family's role in the company's success. You can also order a fountain Coke, a Coke float, or an ice cream cone at its counter.

Cola Ham

Vicksburg cooks have shown their loyalty toward Coca-Cola in the kitchen, as this terrific treatment of the holiday ham contributed by Sallie Bingham Terry to *Vintage Vicksburg* attests.

MAKES 20 TO 25 SERVINGS

1 (6-pound) semi-boneless, fully cooked ham
1 box (16 ounces) brown sugar
1 can (12 ounces) Coca-Cola

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Place the ham in a roasting pan. Score the top of the ham with a sharp knife in a diamond pattern. Place in the oven just until warm, about 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and cut the dark brown rind off the ham. Pack the outside of the ham with brown sugar to form a ¼-inch-thick crust. Pour the cola into the bottom of pan, not over the ham.

Bake the ham until the top of the brown sugar crust dries, about 10 minutes, and then baste with the pan juices. Continue baking, uncovered, for 1 hour, basting every 10 minutes. Serve warm or room temperature, basting occasionally as it cools.

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN AREA

★ LD's Restaurant and Catering. 1111 Mulberry Street. 601-636-9838.

Along Vicksburg's famed Catfish Row, in the shadow of a giant riverboat casino, stands LD's Restaurant, one of the city's best-loved spots for authentic soul food. The cheery, apple-green dining room draws a racially mixed crowd of white-collar and blue-collar workers to its lunch menu and buffet line, where a wide selection of meats and vegetables rotates daily. In a round-up of the best southern foods of the region, *Garden and Gun* magazine once listed its macaroni and cheese among "100 Things You Simply Must Eat Before You Die."

Along with the ubiquitous pond-raised catfish, buffalo fish is on the menu—not a delicacy likely to be featured anytime soon in a high-end lifestyle magazine. Often mistaken for carp, this wide-mouthed, silver-scaled inhabitant of rivers, ponds, and lakes is commonly viewed as trash fish. But it remains a nostalgic favorite among people from around here who grew up poor and were accustomed to making meals of whatever wound up on their lines. At LD's, it arrives in a crispy coating on a bun with lettuce and tomato and resembles a thin pork chop.

Proprietor Larry Donell Prentiss developed a taste for buffalo fish ("a good river fish similar to whiting and trout," he says) growing up right along these riverbanks. After high school he landed a kitchen job with the Army Corps of Engineers and discovered his calling. In the early 1990s he opened his own restaurant on Catfish Row—the start of a business that has since expanded to three outposts and a catering operation. The original location has a nightclub with pool tables and a stage, where he hosts live entertainment several times a month and serves an extended menu that features his hand-battered jumbo shrimp.

Catfish Row has evolved quite a bit. A children's park with a splash fountain, art exhibits, and well-tended gardens have replaced the tumbledown shacks and juke joints that once crowded this riverbank enclave.

But Larry Prentiss can still cook you a real taste of the Delta, Catfish Row style.

★ Main Street Market. 902 Cherry Street. 601-634-8088.

The bite-size, melt-in-your-mouth biscuits made famous by Betty Bullard, one of Vicksburg's foremost hostesses, are reason enough to head here for lunch. Everything else is gravy.

Built in 1840, Main Street Market is a two-story former grocery store perched on a picturesque corner in view of the Old Courthouse Museum. The small dining room has a brick floor scattered with antique tables. Shelves filled with assorted gourmet products, antique china, and handmade quilts for sale line the walls. A ladder-back chair occupies the wall space above the mantel.

"Mama was an antique dealer and she got this great chair that you can't sit in, so we hung it," explains Sally Bullard. "Mama" is Betty Bullard, who lives in the George Washington Ball House across the street. She operates the restored frontier home as a bed-and-breakfast and gives tours by appointment. She helps her daughter and son-in-law, Chris Fink, run the Main Street Market.

The mother of eight and widow of a former mayor and chancery judge, Betty Bullard built her biscuit-making reputation hosting countless get-togethers for a hundred or more friends and neighbors. Sally Bullard inherited both her mother's love of entertaining and the biscuit-making gene.

Sally met her Cajun husband while managing a chain restaurant in New Orleans, where he was a chef. When the opportunity arose to open their own eatery in Sally's hometown, they were ready. Mother, daughter, and son-in-law put their heads together to devise a menu that would showcase their talents. The biscuits, fruit salad in ginger dressing, and lemon chess pie are all Betty's. Sally gets credit for the boozy chocolate bread pudding and the custard-filled cream puffs drizzled with chocolate. The muffalettas, gumbo, and entrées that change daily are the work of Chris. A spinach-stuffed chicken special is crisp-skinned and juicy and topped with a delicate thyme-scented mushroom sauce. It's served alongside herb-seasoned rice and olive oil–slicked green beans that still have snap.

Betty Bullard's Sweet-Milk Biscuits

Main Street Market is one of the few eateries left, even in the South, that still insists on making its biscuits from scratch. Theirs are crisp, light, and flaky and cut into small rounds that are purely addictive. Two things make these biscuits distinctive. First, unlike for most southern biscuits, whole milk is used rather than buttermilk. Second, she adds a generous amount of baking powder to the self-rising flour, which makes them as light as a feather.

MAKES 36 TO 48 SMALL BISCUITS

4 cups self-rising flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
½ cup Crisco shortening
1½ cups whole milk, plus more as needed
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted

Preheat the oven to 450°F.

In a large bowl, combine the flour and baking powder. Cut in the shortening with a pastry blender. Stir in enough milk to make sticky dough that holds together. Pour onto a well-floured work surface; fold over and knead several times. Roll out to a ¾- to 1-inch thickness. Stamp out biscuits with a small round cutter, taking care not to twist the cutter so that the biscuits will rise evenly. Gather the scraps and gently form a biscuit or two by hand.

Arrange the biscuits on a baking sheet and brush the tops with the melted butter. Bake until light golden, 15 to 18 minutes. Serve hot.

★ **Solly's Hot Tamales.** 1921 Washington Street. 601-636-2020.

Henry Solly, Vicksburg's most famous tamale maker, died in 1992, just shy of his 101st birthday. But his tamale recipe lives on inside a brick storefront in a rundown section of the business district. And like most restaurants in the Delta, this one has a story.

Solly, the son of Cuban immigrants, began selling his tamales on the street in 1939. One day a young nurse in training told him she was hungry but short on cash, so he gave her some tamales for free. That started a lifetime friendship between Solly and May Belle Hampton.

In the late 1950s, after a conflict with his children, Solly turned to Hampton for help. He shared his tamale-making secrets with

Hampton and her daughter, and they helped him run the business until his death. Solly left the business to May Belle in his will. May Belle's daughter, Jewel McCain, runs the business now.

Solly's tamales, slender and compact as a cigar, are spicier than most. The seasoning includes salt, a chili blend ordered from Texas, cumin, oregano, garlic, red pepper, and rendered beef fat. "Liquid gold" is what Solly called the latter ingredient—his secret for adding moistness as well as flavor.

Besides tamales, McCain serves hamburgers, hot dogs, burritos, and nachos. And when she's got some time to spare from tamale rolling? She makes pralines and millionaires—a chocolate, caramel, and nut confection—that she wraps in cellophane and sells at the counter. Around Christmas, she also offers divinity.

★ **The Attic Gallery's Highway 61 Coffeehouse.** 1101 Washington Street. 601-638-9221.

On this Saturday morning, the crowd at the Highway 61 Coffeehouse is more hyped up than usual—and not just on caffeine. Heather Burns, Vicksburg's French-trained organic baker, has just arrived, and is unloading plastic coolers filled with Pain de Provence, Croissants de Nice, Gateau Breton, Sables de Nantes. She has brought rustic country loaves in various shapes: some flavored with olive oil and fennel seed; others, with buttermilk and local honey. And she has set up an inviting display of fancy desserts, including bittersweet chocolate mousse in little plastic cups. Lattes and espressos in hand, customers swarm the table to stake their claim.

In a small Mississippi city known more for its biscuits than baguettes, this happening coffeehouse and gallery is an ideal venue for artisans like Burns. The silver-ponytailed proprietor, Daniel Boone, is a Vicksburg native committed to promoting aspects of his hometown's culture that don't involve war memorials.

The spot hosts blues jams on occasion; Boone himself is a drummer and considers his focus on regional music an "educational component" of his enterprise. Upstairs, Boone's wife, Lesley Silver, runs a folk art gallery.

They serve Batdorf and Bronson coffee, roasted fresh weekly, as well as cheesecake baked by a cousin in Jackson (Moore Cheesecakes), and pound cakes, biscotti, cookies, and brownies shipped in from bakeries around the country.

★ **Walnut Hills Round Table Restaurant.** 1214 Adams Street. 601-638-4910. www.walnuthillsms.net

When visitors ask where to go for the quintessential Vicksburg dining experience, they are inevitably directed to Walnut Hills.

Here you get the entire southern-hospitality package: antique-filled old house, tall rockers on the rambling front porch, service as sweet as the iced tea and—most important—ample helpings of all the Deep South classics, lovingly prepared by cooks who trained at their mama's knee.

You can take your pick from a dozen or more meats and vegetables that spin around lazy Susans atop large round communal tables. Or you can order off the menu at a private table. Each table is topped with a basket of corn muffins, yeast rolls, and biscuits—all homemade—and big bowls of Miss Alma's cole slaw. Whiskey bottles are filled with hot pepper vinegar, made in house, for seasoning peas and greens. And head cook Herdcine Williams's cayenne-laced fried chicken is legendary.

Though modest compared with many of the grand estates in the historic district, Walnut Hills is nevertheless a striking presence on the pleasant tree-lined residential street it has occupied since 1880. Tall plantation shutters flank the windows of its celery-colored clapboard facade, and white spindle rails line the porch and steps. Most notable are its pierced columns, made of wood cut into various patterns with a jigsaw—an architectural characteristic that dates to the steamboat era, when Italianate style was all the rage. Because some of the patterns have shapes reminiscent of hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs, one theory is that a poker-playing carpenter may have contrived them.

Kim Ferris, a businesswoman from a prominent Vicksburg family, transformed the house into a boarding house–style restaurant in 1980. Williams, a veteran of the Old Southern Tea Room—a Vicksburg landmark known for its shimmering aspics, rich casseroles, and boozy cream pies, as well as the meat-and-three basics—was hired to run the kitchen.

Joyce May Clingan had been a patron for years before she bought Walnut Hills in 1995. She has been able to assure continuity, she says, largely because the invaluable Williams still presides over the cooking, and Williams's brother, son, and nephew all work in the kitchen as well. Each has contributed to the lengthy menu.

Walnut Hills Bourbon Pie

This pie is a favorite at Walnut Hills during the holiday season but makes a light and luxurious-tasting finale to any cool-weather dinner party.

MAKES 6 TO 8 SERVINGS

CRUST

1½ cups chocolate cookie crumbs (reserve 2 to 3 teaspoons for garnish)
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter, melted

FILLING

21 large marshmallows
1 cup evaporated milk
2 cups heavy cream
3 tablespoons bourbon

For the crust: Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a medium bowl, stir together the cookie crumbs and the butter. Press firmly across the bottom and up the sides of a 9-inch pie plate to form a pie shell. Bake 8 to 10 minutes. Let cool to room temperature.

For the filling: In a medium saucepan, heat the marshmallows and milk over low heat, stirring, until the marshmallows melt and the mixture is smooth. Don't let the mixture burn or boil. Let cool to room temperature.

In a mixing bowl, whip the cream to stiff peaks. Spoon about 2 cups into a bowl, cover, and refrigerate to use on top of the pie. Fold the remaining whipped cream into the marshmallow mixture. Stir in the bourbon and pour into the pie shell. Refrigerate the pie until the filling is set, about 4 hours. Top the pie with the reserved whipped cream and sprinkle with the reserved chocolate crumbs.

Besides the requisite fried chicken and fried catfish, popular entrées include chicken pot pie, country-fried steak, and pork loin with molasses, apple cider, and sage. For lunch, chicken or shrimp salad is stuffed in a tomato and served with olive tea sandwiches. Desserts specials change daily. There is a glass case filled with whole turtle cheesecakes, coconut cream pies, and a "six-pound apple pie," made by either Herdcine or Joyce. You can buy those to go, as well as most anything else on the menu now—one of the few changes Joyce has made and gotten away with.

"A few years ago, I moved a stuffed animal and a few things around the bar," she recalls, "and I didn't think I'd ever hear the end of it."

WALNUT
HILLS
WALNUT
HILLS

ST. GEORGE ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH ANNUAL LEBANESE DINNER

★ **EVERY YEAR SINCE 1959,** the women of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church host a community dinner that pays homage to the congregation's roots in Lebanon and Syria. In 1910, St. George became one of the first Orthodox churches in the South. Members are mostly Syrian-Lebanese, but other heritages, such as Greek, Serbian, and Russian, are represented.

Mary Louise Nosser, a small, olive-skinned woman with an easy laugh, is a lifelong member of the church and has been active in the feast since the beginning. Besides rolling hundreds of stuffed cabbage leaves, she conducts workshops in Lebanese cooking prior to the event.

"The girls work ferociously on it the whole month," she says. Pastries are always sell-outs. Varieties include *ma'mool* (nut-filled pastries made with cream of wheat), and *sambousek* (crescent-shaped pastries dipped in syrup), along with the more familiar baklava. Nosser notes that they've made some adjustments to the traditional formula for the buttery, flaky triangles made with phyllo dough, nuts, and lots of sugar.

"We use pecans instead of walnuts and a sugar syrup instead of cinnamon." At home, both cultures—Delta and Lebanese—blend naturally in the kitchen. "On Sunday, all the Lebanese have rice and lentils or a pot of lentil soup," Nosser says. "But we might also have mustard greens and fried chicken."

Cabbage rolls appear regularly on the Vicksburg Lebanese home dinner table as well. They are the other big hit of the community dinner. "People ask me what it is in our cabbage rolls that makes them so good, and I say, 'Honey, it must be God's hands in it.'"

St. George Cabbage Rolls

These cabbage rolls, for which the ladies of St. George are famous, are adapted from the terrific little spiral-bound cookbook *T' Ai Bien—Uhmm Delicious*. Unlike other recipes in which the rolls are cooked in tomato sauce, these rolls get their flavor from lots of garlic, cinnamon, and fresh lemon juice.

MAKES ABOUT 40 PIECES

1 large or 2 medium heads of cabbage (about 2½ pounds)
6 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
1 cinnamon stick, broken in half
1 pound ground beef or lamb
2 cups raw long-grain rice
½ pound (2 sticks) butter, melted
5 teaspoons salt, divided
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, divided
3 teaspoons ground cinnamon
¾ cup fresh lemon juice

Remove the large, leathery leaves from the outside of the cabbage. Rinse the leaves and set them aside. Bring a very large pot of water to a boil. Core the cabbage and then lower it, cored-side down, into the water. With tongs, remove the leaves from the cabbage head as they loosen. Let the leaves cook until they are tender and pliable, about 3 minutes. Drain them well and pat them dry. Trim away any hard stems and cut the largest leaves in half. Dry the pot and line the bottom with some of the uncooked leathery leaves. Drop in the garlic cloves and cinnamon stick.

In a large bowl, stir together the ground beef, rice, butter, 1 tablespoon of the salt, ½ teaspoon of pepper, and the ground cinnamon.

To assemble the rolls, spread 1½ to 2 tablespoons of the meat mixture down the center of each cooked cabbage leaf. Roll up the leaf firmly like a cigar, leaving the ends open. Arrange the rolls across the bottom of the lined pot, tucking them closely together to hold them in place. When the first layer is complete, arrange the next layer of rolls in the opposite direction. Arrange the remaining uncooked leaves over the rolls. Cover the rolls with cold water to a depth of 2 inches and add the remaining 2 teaspoons salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Hold the leaves and rolls under the water with an inverted plate.

Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer gently for 20 minutes. Add the lemon juice and continue simmering until the filling is done, 10 to 15 minutes more. Lift the rolls out of the pot with a slotted spoon, drain well, and serve warm.

★ **Beechwood Restaurant and Lounge.** 4451 East Clay Street. 601-636-3761.

Inside and out, the décor of the Beechwood Restaurant and Lounge is hopelessly—and proudly—stuck in the 1960s. The backlit sign that hovers above the squat beige building depicts a slab of steak, a shrimp, and a saxophone-playing martini glass in sunglasses. Outside, biker dudes in black leather mill around their souped-up choppers. A lone grillmeister behind a Plexiglas window tends the hefty slabs of cow sizzling over an open pit in the paneled dining room, where plastic fruit displays and framed pieces of cannonball decorate the walls.

A hallway lined with posters touting old boxing matches leads to a dark and cavernous honky-tonk, where patrons dance to live bands, watch sports events on a giant screen (one concession to the present decade), or just hang out at the bar. Bartenders can mix you a white chocolate martini or pour a Mississippi-brewed Lazy Magnolia Southern Pecan Nut Brown Ale. On occasion, guys in long white aprons and thick gloves shuck raw oysters at a long folding table set up near the bar.

"It's nothing fancy. It is what it is," says co-owner Will Hood. The Beechwood has been in his family since it opened more than fifty years ago; today he runs it with his uncle, Rocky Nosser.

The loyal clientele—which includes some of Vicksburg's most food-savvy citizens—doesn't care about the outdated furnishings. It's all about those steaks, which they swear are some of the best in the state. Lightly seasoned with the house spice blend (available for sale), the slabs come with "au jus" dipping sauce and a choice of rich toppings, including a creamy, spicy crawfish sauce.

The Beechwood also takes its fresh seafood seriously; it shows especially in the wondrous shrimp, which are either deep-fried or split and stuffed with crabmeat.

Nothing tastes like an afterthought here. The hush puppies are studded with corn and jalapeno, the broccoli arrives crisp and bright green, and the yeast rolls are feather light and baked fresh daily.

The crowning glory of the Beechwood salad is the homemade dressing—especially the house specialty named for the Nosser family. It's a creamy, spicy, Thousand Island–like concoction akin to the "comeback sauce" popular throughout the state. Other Vicksburg restaurants now have their versions, but the Nossers lay claim to the original, attributing its invention to

the late Johnnie Nosser, proprietor of a local bygone haunt, Johnny's Drive In. (It's sold by the jar at Rowdy's Family Catfish Shack, also owned by the family, see page 270.)

The Nosser family's influence on Vicksburg's development—particularly as it relates to food—extends back quite a ways. Rocky and Rowdy Nosser are grandsons of Pete Nosser, who opened Vicksburg's first supermarket, the Jitney Jungle, in 1933. The Nossers owned and operated four Jitney Jungle stores in Vicksburg for more than fifty years. Besides selling groceries, the original store at South and Monroe streets, nicknamed the "Big Jitney," included a cafeteria, toy store, and delicatessen. It burned down in 1965 and Bancorp South's main Vicksburg office now sits on the site.

In 2009 the "Big Jitney" was immortalized by artist Robert Dafford in one of the colorful Catfish Row murals.

★ Goldie's Trail Bar-B-Que. 2430 South Frontage Road. 601-636-9839.

Since 1960, this restaurant with the chuck wagon in front has been the place where Vicksburg residents go for their barbecue fix. In the early days it was a popular teen hangout; today many of those same customers now bring their kids and grandkids. Part of the appeal is nostalgia, but it's the consistent 'cue that keeps them coming back. The pork is thinly sliced—not pulled—and slathered in a rich, Western-style red sauce that loosely follows the formula Gola Marshall, a Missouri native, devised in the late 1940s and passed on to his offspring, who still run the business. The ribs are St. Louis style—that is, a rectangular rack of spare ribs with the gristly rib tips removed. Instead of the usual soft white bread accompaniment, you have the option to order French bread slices toasted with garlic butter.

The décor inside this rather plain building is pure Vicksburg. In place of pig paraphernalia are framed illustrations of cotton fields and, on one wall, a display donated by a local citizen of surgical tools and medicines from a Civil War hospital.

★ Jacques Café in the Park. 4137 North Frontage Road. 601-638-5811.

battlefieldinnms.com

Jacques Café is just what it sounds like: a restaurant that specializes in old-school continental fare prepared by a Frenchman. But that's not what it looks like, especially from the outside. This local stalwart is the in-house restaurant of the Battlefield Inn, on the edge of the city's most famous

attraction: the 1,800-acre Vicksburg National Military Park. The inn is easy to spot from the highway; just look for the cannons on the lawn. But aside from the faux antebellum pillars and white wooden rockers at the main entrance, the hotel itself looks much like the other older chain hotels along the highway. Jacques has its own entrance, but it's more entertaining to go through the inn's lobby, with its portraits of Confederate officers on one wall and Scarlett and Rhett on another. A resident talking parrot greets visitors at the front door.

Jacques Parmegiani, who commands the restaurant at the end of the hallway, came to Vicksburg in 1988 from his native France, where he'd been cooking in restaurants since he was fourteen. He quickly developed a reputation for well-prepared steak and seafood served with sauces made in the French technique, as well as ultrarich continental classics like veal Oscar and fettuccine alfredo. He expanded his repertoire to include fried chicken, catfish (fried or in an amandine sauce), gumbo, and several Cajun-Creole offerings.

The atmosphere inside Jacques is pleasant enough, if unapologetically frumpy, with its fat ceramic chefs and other retro French bistro bric-a-brac. At breakfast, they serve a standard steam-table buffet aimed at tourists. But at night, locals come here for both special-occasion meals and more casual family dining. A sports bar in the back of the hotel, also owned by Jacques, gets notably rowdy on karaoke nights.

★ The Tomato Place. 3229 Highway 61 South. 601-661-0040. www.thetomatoplace.com

From the outside, the Tomato Place looks like an eccentric roadside market. Adirondack and bent-branch furniture, potted plants, and rustic birdhouses are scattered around a group of sheds. Cable spools serve as tables for baskets of produce. Crudely painted signs advertise hot dogs, Frito pies, boiled peanuts, and "hamburers."

But inside, it's much more: part produce market, part old-time general store, and part Caribbean-style café.

The Tomato Place boasts some of the freshest food in town—jerk-spiced Jamaican burgers with hand-cut sweet potato fries, vegetable plates, and fruit smoothies blended to order.

Bins brimming with produce—much of it grown locally—flank the entrance to the main shed, as do refrigerator cases with shelves of plastic cups filled with fruit for customized smoothies.

Specials are handwritten on a board. On this day, it's grilled catfish fillet on a bed of marinated vegetable salad with grilled garlic bread, or a smoked

chicken plate with potato salad and baked beans. The restaurant also has an extended menu of po-boys, sandwiches, hamburgers, hot dogs, salads, and vegetable sides, which vary with the season. And along with the cookies, cakes, and quick breads are several desserts baked daily—usually bread pudding, cake, or a fruit cobbler or pie.

Brightly painted and outfitted with an overhead fan and small tables, the café conjures an island beach shack. Zydeco music fills the room from an overhead speaker. While you wait for food, you can browse the rest of the little market. Merchandise includes Mississippi-ground grits, unshelled pecans, homemade breads, cane syrup and sorghum, and a big assortment of fedoras and other classic hats.

Luke Hughes, the white-bearded proprietor in the classic Panama, made his livelihood selling insurance until a strawberry bush set him on a new path. He tried his hand at strawberry jam and soon was canning and preserving everything in sight. He opened the produce stand and began selling his preserves, which now line the floor-to-ceiling shelves in the café.

It's a delightful spot to take a break—especially in summertime, when the Tomato Place truly lives up to its name.

Tomato Place Pie

This casserole is adapted from a longstanding favorite at the Tomato Place and also found in one of Vicksburg's newer cookbooks, *Moore Groceries,* a beautifully packaged collection of local recipes with rare historical photographs assembled with help from the local historical societies to raise funds for the Old Court House Museum. This dish is hearty enough for an entrée, served with a simple salad or steamed vegetables.

MAKES 6 TO 8 MAIN-DISH OR 12 TO 16 SIDE-DISH SERVINGS

6 large tomatoes
1 tablespoon butter, at room temperature
2½ cups dry Italian-style bread crumbs, divided
1 pound thinly sliced sharp Cheddar cheese
1 large onion, sliced
8 bacon slices, cooked crisp and crumbled
¾ cup bacon-ranch dressing, or your favorite homemade or bottled creamy dressing
¾ cup mayonnaise
Salt and ground black pepper, to taste
1½ cups cottage cheese
1 tablespoon dried oregano, or to taste
1 bell pepper, cut into rings

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

To peel the tomatoes, bring a large pot of water to a boil. Meanwhile, fill a large bowl with ice water. With a small paring knife, score the bottom of each tomato with an X. Using a slotted spoon, dip each tomato into boiling water for 20 to 30 seconds. Immediately transfer into the ice water for another 20 to 30 seconds to cool. With a small paring knife, peel off the skins beginning with the X on the bottom. Cut the tomato crosswise into ¼-inch-thick slices.

Use the butter to grease the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Spread 1 cup of the bread crumbs across the bottom and cover them with half of the cheese slices. Next, layer in one-third of the tomatoes, one-third of the onions, and one-third of the bacon. In a small bowl, stir together the dressing and mayonnaise and spread half of it over the dish. Season with salt and pepper. Spread all of the cottage cheese over the top. Sprinkle ¼ cup of the bread crumbs around the edge of the dish to build up the sides. Add another one-third of the tomatoes, one-third of the onions, one-third of the bacon, and the remaining dressing mixture over the cottage cheese. Sprinkle ¼ cup of the bread crumbs around the edges of dish and the remaining 1 cup on top. Arrange the remaining tomatoes and the remaining onions over the bread crumbs. Arrange the remaining cheese slices over the onions. Sprinkle with the remaining bacon and the oregano. Arrange the bell pepper on top.

Bake for 45 minutes until lightly browned on top and bubbling around the edges. Let sit for 15 minutes before serving.

SOUTHERN SWEETS FOR A SEDER FEAST

★ **WHILE THE JEWISH POPULATION** of the Delta has dwindled dramatically since World War II, those who remain continue to celebrate their heritage. A handful of people still meet every Friday night for lay-led services at the Congregation Anshe Chesed and go out to dinner afterward. In her seminal book, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, Marcie Cohen Ferris writes about Seders attended by the Anshe Chesed members and out-of-town guests at Vicksburg's antebellum Martha Vick mansion. While the main meal consists of the usual traditional foods, Cohen describes the elaborate dessert spread, which includes several sweets with a southern accent, like these "pralinized" macaroons. A friend from Natchez gave the recipe to Ann Grundfest Gerache, one of the congregation's members. They are light and airy, easy to make, and hard to stop eating.

Mississippi Praline Macaroons

MAKES ABOUT 4 DOZEN

3 large egg whites, at room temperature
¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
Pinch of salt
1 cup packed light brown sugar
1 cup roughly chopped pecans
About 48 pecan halves

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Grease 2 or 3 large baking sheets or line them with foil and then grease the foil.

In a large bowl, beat the egg whites, cream of tartar, and salt with an electric mixer set to medium speed until frothy. Increase the mixer speed to high and continue beating, adding the brown sugar a small handful at a time and scraping the bowl once, until the whites form stiff, glossy peaks. (This will take a few minutes.)

With a large rubber spatula, fold in the chopped pecans. Drop the batter by heaping teaspoonsful onto the prepared baking sheets, spacing them 1 inch apart. Press a pecan half into each, flattening the cookie slightly.

Bake until the macaroons are set and feel hard and crisp, about 35 minutes. Transfer to wire racks to cool completely, then store in airtight containers.

MORE LOCAL FLAVOR

★ **Roca Restaurant and Bar.** 127 Country Club Drive. 601-638-0800. rocarestaurant.com

Inside the Vicksburg Country Club, this restaurant's ambitious menu reflects the eclectic background of chef-owner Jay Parmegiani, whose French-born father runs Jacques Café in the Battlefield Inn. Jay picked up classical training in culinary school and learned traditional southern fare from his Mississippi grandmother. Along with the requisite blue-plate specials, he makes a fried green tomato and crab cake Napoleon with rémoulade and black-eyed pea relish, and grilled marinated pork tenderloin with sweet potato mash, candied pecans, and port wine demi-glace.

★ **Rowdy's Family Catfish Shack.** Highway 80/Highway 27 Intersection. 601-638-2375.

Rowdy's looks more like an office building than a shack. But inside it's got all the trappings that have made it a longtime favorite for a catfish-and-fries fix. Its lengthy menu includes a full roster of other southern favorites as well, including individual servings of cornbread in cast-iron skillets. The extra-crunchy fries are batter-dipped and served with the house "Nosser sauce," their version of comeback sauce, which they sell by the quart to go.

★ **Rusty's Riverfront Grill.** 901 Washington Street. 601-638-2030.

This unassuming wooden building in the middle of Vicksburg's historic district is routinely crowded; hour-long waits are common. The menu is rooted in the Deep South and Cajun country, with some contemporary twists. Gumbo and fried green tomatoes topped with lump crabmeat are two of the items that draw raves.

★ **The Tamale Place.** 2190 South Frontage Road. 601-634-8900.

Located in an aqua cement-block building with a drive-through window, the Tamale Place is run by descendants of longtime tamale maker Henry Solly. He bequeathed his longtime business downtown, Solly's Tamales, to someone else after a family dispute, but that didn't stop the kids from building a strong following for their own grease-slicked, husk-wrapped versions. They also sell Frito pies and a few Cajun-Creole specialties like pork boudin. There's nowhere inside the Tamale Place to sit, so if you're traveling, be prepared to eat in your car—and ask for lots of extra napkins.

★ **Toot's Grocery.** 2500 Confederate Avenue. 601-636-3603.

An artificial Christmas tree decorated with teddy bears stands year-round in the window of this old-time grocery and café. "Toot" was the nickname of the original owner of this popular local haunt. When he passed away, his son, Pat Dennis, took over. Longtime residents and visitors can soak up some true local color over a burger, a Reuben, or a homemade chicken salad sandwich.

EPILOGUE

THERE'S NO SIGNPOST proclaiming where the Delta ends. But at Vicksburg's Catfish Row, the murky waters of the Mississippi and the Yazoo merge at last, marking the unofficial southern terminus of a remarkable region.

I could follow the southward path of many a motorist and continue on to New Orleans, where (or just south of the city, anyway) the Mississippi finally empties into the Gulf of Mexico, Highway 61 ends, and the diverse cultures that have met at the mouth of the river for centuries reveal themselves in every aspect of life—not the least of which is what's arguably the most distinctive cuisine in America.

But that's another trip. For now, the Delta has provided more than enough culture, history, character—flavor—to digest, and it's time to head home.

I climb the short, steep hill over the levee back onto Washington Avenue, pass the old brick storefronts and the Victorian gaslights, and head toward I-20 East. Before I can blink, the scenery has shifted back to the familiar. Highway lanes widen and multiply. Traffic thickens. The endless row crops and open skies give way to outlet malls, construction sites, and exit signs for fast-food chains and service stations. I lose track of where I am; state and county lines run together. By the time I reach metropolitan Atlanta, the spell of the Mississippi Delta has all but worn off.

But I can't complain. Here in my gentrified neighborhood, I have no shortage of excellent dining choices. I can walk to top-rated restaurants serving organic, free-range, hand-butchered, artisanal ingredients grown close to home or flown in from all over the world. I can satisfy my cravings for sushi, carnitas, wood-fired pizza, Belgian beer, grass-fed burgers, hand-crafted cocktails, or whatever taste sensation the gourmet magazines deem trendy.

These offerings make for an enjoyable evening, yet very rarely does the experience make an indelible impression—certainly not like the pompano I ate in a private booth at Lusco's in Greenwood more than thirty years ago. For that to happen, you need more than fresh ingredients, a talented chef, and a stylish space. You need an authentic history, a cast of characters, and a setting that connects deeply to the soil, and the soul, of a community.

Delta cooks and restaurateurs understand this. They are more than culinary artists and entrepreneurs. They are curators of a culture as distinctive as the strange, alluvial land on which their heritage and identity is built. Every dish they serve, and every artifact on the wall, has a backstory. And once we allow them to feed us at their tables, pour us a drink, and show us their hospitality, we become part of the narrative, too.

And then we want to preserve it, and pass it on, the best way we know how—through music, art, the written word.

Or by inviting people over to dinner.

Every so often, I pull out the cookbooks I collected on my Delta journeys, or the recipes scribbled down in notebooks or on napkins. I pass cheese straws and catfish crostini with bourbon-based Mississippi Gambler cocktails. I fry battered dill pickle slices to dip in creamy homemade ranch sauce. I make chicken spaghetti the way Craig Claiborne's mother did back in Indianola, completely from scratch and worth every bit of the effort. I pile lemon icebox pie with ridiculously high meringue according to the method perfected by a certain playwright who grew up in Clarksdale.

With B. B. King or Muddy Waters or Bobbie Gentry playing in the background, I regale my guests with stories of eating a soul burger in a former brothel; watching the crowning of the Catfish Queen; scarfing fried pickles in the café that inspired a hit song about Memphis; sharing hot tamales and steaks with my husband at the table next to football legend Archie Manning and his buddies.

And I make the case for coming with me the next time I want to satisfy my hunger for more Delta stories—and more of the tastes only the Delta can dish up.

RESOURCES GENERAL NOTES ON DELTA DINING

THE RESTAURANTS I focused on in these pages are known for serving good food that transcends trends in a welcoming atmosphere. Beyond that, they contribute to a better understanding of the Delta and its citizens. Most of these businesses have been established for years, but even newcomers are doing their part to preserve the heritage of their communities.

I have personally dined at all but a very small handful that I could not get to before my deadline. In those cases, I turned to diners whose judgment I could trust to visit for me and report back. Because this research was conducted over a period of several years, I have done my best to update these descriptions as needed.

I hope this book will be a useful starting point for planning tours of the Delta. It's always wise, however, to talk to locals and consult the Internet (many of these eateries have Facebook pages or websites) before finalizing those plans, especially with regards to hours of operation, which are prone to fluctuation.

Here are a few other tips to bear in mind before you visit:

- ★ Many Delta restaurants sell beer but no other liquor. However, they often have BYOB policies and can recommend a nearby liquor store if you ask.
- ★ Some eateries still allow smoking in the dining room. If you are sensitive to cigarette smoke, inquire before going.
- ★ Pork products often flavor vegetables, especially in older restaurants. Ask before ordering if this is a concern, and be aware that vegetarian options are often limited. Deltans are a carnivorous bunch.
- ★ Make sure you have an exact address and a map before heading to a restaurant off the beaten path. Signage can be obscure or nonexistent. A GPS is highly advisable.
- ★ Some of the best food discoveries turn up in the most rustic facilities, but shabby is no excuse for dirty. Inspection scores should be prominently posted. Be wary of restaurants with lower than a "B" or "90" rating. For a quick check of an eatery's latest score online, visit the

Mississippi State Department of Agriculture at www.msdh.state.ms.us or the Tennessee Department of Health's Division of General Environmental Health at dogwood.healthspace.com/tdh.

★ Service may be slower than what you're accustomed to, even in the best-run restaurants. The owners are often used to a clientele that likes to dine at a leisurely pace. Enter with similar expectations and you likely will not be disappointed.

PLAN YOUR ITINERARY

Guidebooks and websites for planning a stay in Memphis abound. The official site, www.memphistravel.com, is a font of basic information, latest news and happenings, and links. The *Commercial Appeal* newspaper's site for fun things to do, www.gomemphis.com, has dining reviews that sometimes stray father south into the Delta. The nonprofit Center for Southern Folklore (www.southernfolklore.com) arranges "cultural tours" of Memphis for travelers who want a full Delta baptism rather than merely a museum experience.

Resources for navigating the small towns and rural communities of the Delta are considerably more limited. Websites for the Mississippi Delta Tourism Association (www.visitthedelta.com), the Mississippi Development Authority / Tourism Division (www.visitmississippi.org), and the Mississippi Tourism Division (www.mstourism.com) are handy tools to begin mapping out your trip. The *Delta Magazine* website, www.deltamagazine.com, has loads of inspiration for planning a road trip, especially in regards to food. Other websites worth bookmarking for good, authentic dining tips in the Delta and elsewhere are www.roadfood.com and www.dixiedining.com.

Here are some other tips for digging deeper into Delta culture.

ORGANIZED AND SELF-GUIDED TOURS OF THE DELTA

Mississippi Delta Literary Tour

Organized by the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture, this five-day annual spring tour includes excursions around the Delta that focus on the region's literary, music, and food traditions. The package includes bus transportation from Greenwood's Alluvian Hotel and meals at local restaurants and prepared by Delta

caterers served in private homes and other venues. Deltaliterarytour .tumblr.com.

Southern Foodways Symposium/Delta Divertissement

The Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), part of the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture, hosts wildly popular food events on the campus each fall. They are preceded by two-day excursions based in Greenwood that delve deeply into aspects of Delta food culture. Like the symposiums, they are popular and sell out quickly. www.southernfoodways.org.

SFA's Mississippi Delta Tamale Trail (www.tamaletrail.com) is referenced throughout these pages. Check out their Oral History Interactive Map (www.southernfoodways.org/documentary/maps) for ideas on places to eat throughout the Delta or anywhere in the South for that matter.

Delta Center for Culture and Learning

With a mission to teach the Delta's significance to the world, this organization at Delta State University arranges formal courses and informal tours of the region. They're accustomed to handing out advice on where to eat and stay. 662-846-4311. www.blueshighway.org.

The Mississippi Blues Trail

The Mississippi Blues Commission has erected more than one hundred markers all over the state to tell the stories of bluesmen and women at sites where they lived and died. At their website (www.msbluestrail.org), you can get a map to plot your routes accordingly and find out more about museums and other blues-related activities and sites. They host a blues program, Highway 61 Radio, broadcast on Mississippi Public Broadcasting. Here you can get a detailed calendar of live music events in the area and subscribe to their podcast. www.highway61radio.com.

Mississippi Freedom Trail

In spring 2011, the Mississippi Development Authority's Tourism Division unveiled plans for erecting markers on the Mississippi Freedom Trail, to commemorate sites that played pivotal roles in the civil rights movement. The first marker stands near Bryant's Store in Money, Mississippi, where

fourteen-year-old Emmett Till allegedly whistled at a white woman in 1955, leading to his brutal murder. For an updated list of current markers, go to www.visitmississippi.org.

Cat Head Blues and Folk Art Recommendations

The renowned Clarksdale shop for all things blues related (see page 78) also has an excellent website jam-packed with Delta events and attractions for planning a memorable and authentic music-packed, food-filled pilgrimage. Owner Roger Stolle is the self-appointed tour guide who has written a book (*Hidden History of Mississippi Blues*), produced several Delta-related documentaries (*M Is for Mississippi*, *We Juke It Up Here*), and organized widely attended and publicized festivals. On his site he offers a list of recommended CDs, DVDs, and books about the blues. www.cathead.biz.

ABOUT THE RECIPES

THE RECIPES I selected were culled from many more that I tested in my home kitchen. Together they present, to my way of thinking, a composite of the character and diversity of the people, places, and social customs I have observed throughout the Delta. This is the same criteria I used in selecting eateries and food products to highlight. I did not include routine recipes widely available elsewhere unless it revealed something pertinent about a person, restaurant, or story. Some chefs gladly shared their recipes; other chefs politely declined, wanting to protect carefully guarded secrets. I also scoured community cookbooks, websites, and other publications to produce the best and most authentic renditions I could. Attributions are included in head notes to each recipe, along with the names of the creators when applicable. Often I made minor adjustments to clarify or update a procedure, while trying my best to keep the integrity of the original recipe intact. In those cases I specified that the recipe was "adapted." The following recipes required written permission from the publisher.

"Dewberry Cobbler" from *The Soul of Southern Cooking*, by Kathy Starr. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. Accompanying text reproduced with the permission of the University Press of Mississippi.

"Mississippi Praline Macaroons" from *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, by Marcie Cohen Ferris. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Marcie Cohen Ferris. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press. www.uncpress.unc.edu.

"Sorta Kinda Like Merigold Tomatoes" from *Somebody Stole the Cornbread from My Dressing*, by Elizabeth Heiskell and Susanne Reed. Johnson City, Tenn.: Overmountain Press, 2010. Used by permission of the Overmountain Press.

"Tomato Aspic," "Homemade Mayonnaise," and "Pickled Shrimp" from *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral*, by Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays. New York: Miramax Books, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays. Abridged and reprinted by permission of Miramax Books. All rights reserved.

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SELECTED READING

I FOUND THESE COOKBOOKS very helpful in educating me about Delta foodways. Adaptations of some of their recipes appear throughout the book.

Belzoni Garden Club. *All Rolled Together*. n.d.

Charleston Arts and Revitalization Effort. *Cooking with C.A.R.E.: A Collection of Recipes by Charleston Arts and Revitalization Effort*. 2008. http://www.charleston-artscenter.com.

Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Delta Rice Promotions Committee. *Between the Levees*. 1994.

Foose, Martha Hall. *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*. Clarkson Potter, 2008.

———. *A Southerly Way*. Clarkson Potter, 2011.

Humphreys Academy Patrons. *Festival Cookbook: A Collection of Favorite Recipes*. 1983.

Junior Auxiliary of Vicksburg. *Ambrosia: A Deep-South Mixture of Homes, Recipes, and History*. 1997; reprint, 2008. http://www.javicksburg.org.

———. *Vintage Vicksburg: A Collection of Recipes from the Junior Auxiliary of Vicksburg, Mississippi*. 2008. http://www.javicksburg.org.

The Junior League of Memphis. *Heart and Soul: Stirring Recipes from Memphis*. 1992. http://www.jlmemphis.org.

Mellor, Ernie. *Hog Wild: Just about Everything You Want to Know about Barbeque*. 2002. http://www.hogwildbbq.com.

North Sunflower PTA. *The Pick of the Crop: A Collection of Recipes*. Drew, Miss., 1978.

Reed, Julia. *Ham Biscuits, Hostess Gowns, and Other Southern Specialties*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

Reed, Keetha DePriest. *Culinary Kudzu: Recollections and Recipes from Growing Up Southern*. Inverness, Miss.: Pecan Street Press, 2002.

Roughton, Evelyn, and Tony Roughton. *Classic Catfish from the Crown at the Antique Mall*. Memphis, Tenn.: Wimmer Books, 1993. http://www.thecrownrestaurant.com.

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. *Bayou Cuisine: Its Tradition and Transition*. 1970.

Townsend, Melissa, ed. *The Delta Magazine Cookbook: A Celebrated Collection of Recipes and Culinary Traditions from the Most Southern Place on Earth*. Cleveland, Miss.: Coopwood, 2011.

Vicksburg and Warren County Historical Society. *Moore Groceries*. 2008. http://www.oldcourthouse.org.

Woman's Club of Itta Bena. *Itta Bena's Favorite Recipes*. 1950.
Woman's Exchange of Memphis. *Tea Room Treasures*. 1996. http://www.womans-exchange.com.
Women of St. George Eastern Orthodox Church. *T'ai Bien: A Delicious Collection of Lebanese Recipes*. 1988.

DELTA NONFICTION AND FICTION

Here are some of the books that helped me get my head around the Delta and its mindset, directly and indirectly. I have supplemented this list with a handful of others that come highly recommended from Delta scholars. For a more extensive list of recommendations, see www.blueshighway.org/nehbibliography.htm.

And while you're in the area, be sure to check out the regional selection at several destination-worthy bookstores: in Memphis, The Booksellers at Laurelwood (thebooksellersatlaurelwood.com) and Burke's Book Store (burkesbooks.com); in Greenwood, Turnrow Books (www.turnrowbooks.com); in Vicksburg, Lorelei Books (www.loreleibooks.com); and—if you're passing through Oxford—Square Books (www.squarebooks.com).

Barry, John M. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. The story of how this epic disaster transformed the Delta way of life and altered the face of American society and politics.

Blackwell, Unita, with JoAnne Pritchard Morris. *Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom*. New York: Crown, 2006. A civil rights heroine's journey from sharecropper to Freedom Fighter to Mississippi's first black female mayor.

Canonici, Paul. *The Delta Italians: Their Pursuit of the Better Life and Their Struggle against Mosquitoes, Floods, and Prejudice*. Madison, Miss.: P. V. Canonici, 2003. The story of how Italians came to be one of the Delta's most influential ethnic groups.

Cheseborough, Steve. *Blues Traveling: The Holy Sites of the Delta Blues*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. A blues musician and scholar's guidebook to blues sites with historical tidbits.

Clay, Maude Schuyler. *Delta Land*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. Haunting black-and-white photographs of the Delta landscape, with an evocative introduction by Lewis Nordan. (His critically successful 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle* is based on the murder of Emmett Till.)

Cobb, James C. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. This comprehensive yet highly readable history of the Delta has become one of the most recommended books for anyone trying to grasp this complicated region.

Cohn, David L. *Where I Was Born and Raised*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin, 1948. The Greenville-born, Yale-educated journalist and lecturer (1894–1960) uses his boyhood upbringing to examine universal social issues in the twentieth century. (The first part was originally a separate book, *God Shakes Creation*, in which he coined the famous line about the Delta beginning in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel.)

Dunbar, Tony. *Delta Time: A Journey through Mississippi*. New York: Pantheon, 1990. A poignant and lyrical account of the complex and evolving relationships of black and white southerners from one Delta town to the next.

Edge, John T. *Southern Belly: The Ultimate Food Lover's Companion to the South*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2007. An entertaining social history of southern food told through stories behind some of the region's best back roads eateries, which (naturally) include a good handful that help put the Delta in context.

Ferris, William. *Give My Poor Heart Ease*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. The renowned folklorist (also author of *Blues from the Delta*) traveled his native Mississippi throughout the 1960s and 1970s documenting the stories of blues artists. Includes dual CD/DVD with original field recordings and films.

Gage, Justin, and Melissa Gage. *Memphis and the Delta Blues Trail: A Great Destination (Explorer's Guide)*. Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 2009. Comprehensive guide focused on modern and traditional music and art venues, with dining, lodging, and recreational tips.

Morris, Willie. *North toward Home*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. This memoir tells of a leading southern writer's pilgrimage from pre–civil rights Yazoo City to New York, where he became editor of *Harper's* magazine.

Oshinsky, David M. *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press, 1997. The roots of racial distrust in the South traced through Mississippi's harsh penal system.

Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta*. New York: Penguin, 1982. Former *Rolling Stone* editor and *New York Times* pop music writer gives a comprehensive but concise introduction to the blues that's widely viewed as one of the best.

Percy, William Alexander. *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*. New York: Knopf, 1941. Elegantly written memoir of the South's dying aristocracy.

Robertshaw, Nicky, and Rebecca Finlayson. *Insider's Guide to Memphis*. Guilford, Conn.: Globe Pequot, 2007. Detailed guide to the city, with lots of interesting side notes.

Saikku, Mikko. *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. A geographic explanation of how and why the Delta's unique terrain and its inhabitants are so tightly intertwined.

Schweid, Richard. *Catfish and the Delta: Confederate Fish Farming in the Mississippi Delta*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press, 1992. A vivid story of the catfish industry told within the greater context of Delta life.

Shearer, Cynthia. *The Celestial Jukebox*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004. Praised for defying Old South stereotypes, this novel revolves around a grocery store operated by a Chinese immigrant and the challenges he and his neighbors face as their community dies.

Welty, Eudora. *Delta Wedding*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946. Mississippi's Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist offers insights into Delta social customs and family dynamics in this classic centered on a family's preparations for a plantation wedding in 1923.

PHOTO CREDITS

All photos are by Langdon Clay except for the following:

Author: 16, 23, 31, 32, 58, 69, 103, 104, 105, 110, 113, 147, 174, 186, 206, 213, 221, 272
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